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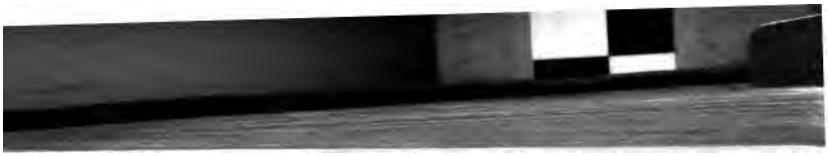

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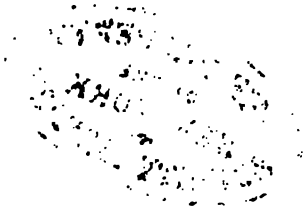

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FRANK VERBECK and BEULAH S. MOORE

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THE STORY OF THE KHEDIVE'S OPALS

THE WIFE
of the
SECRETARY OF STATE

BY

ELLA
MIDDLETON
TYBOUT

AUTHOR OF "POKETOWN PEOPLE"

PHILADELPHIA AND LONDON
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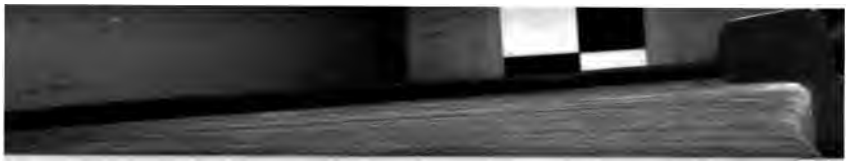

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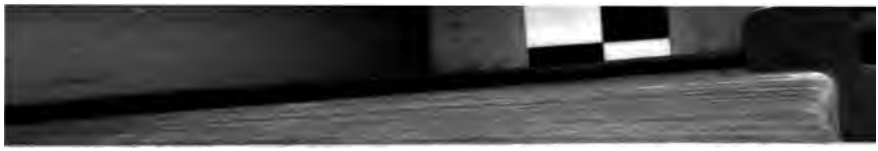
MY MOTHER



INTRODUCTION

"The Wife of the Secretary of State" is constructed upon the possibilities of life in general and of the diplomatic world in particular. It is not intended to portray any especial administration.

ELLA MIDDLETON TYBOUT.

THE WIFE
of the
SECRETARY OF STATE

I

"It needs," said the Senator critically, "a trifle more red pepper."

"But pray be careful," added Monsieur du Pré anxiously, "a grain too much would be fatal. Ah! Gently—very gently."

Are you familiar enough with Washington to know the Alibi Club? Perhaps, in walking down I Street, near Eighteenth, you have passed the little, red-brick house with its black iron railing and many-paned windows without even glancing at the shining brass plate where the one word "Alibi" speaks volumes to the initiated. But then, again, perhaps you have penetrated through the narrow doorway into the grill-rooms beyond; perhaps you have been introduced to the army of chafing-dishes which do such untiring and valiant nightly service during the season, and have even tasted the contents of some of them. If so, you are very fortunate, and further comment is unnecessary.

Senator Byrd was giving a little supper after the theatre, and, in accordance with the rules of the club, he was cooking it himself. His three guests wore an

air of pleased anticipation, for his skill in the manip tion of the chafing-dish made him an acknowle authority, even at the Alibi, where the *bon vivant* Washington are wont to assemble for nightly ga nomic contests.

Senator Byrd was a leader of his party, and his o ions were accorded due deference even by the opposi but no political crisis received closer attention from than a Welsh-rarebit which threatened to become str or a mayonnaise which showed a disposition to sepa into unattractive oily globules.

Monsieur du Pré watched the descent of the pepper breathlessly, and gave vent to a sigh of r as the crucial moment passed safely.

"By the way," he remarked, addressing no on particular, "did you observe Miss Powell to-night? really should not wear green, under the circumstanc

"Why not?" inquired Mr. Rivers, Member of gress from Virginia, idly.

"Because of the old adage," replied the little Att with a chuckle, "'green is forsaken, yellow's forlor you remember it? After her affair with von Wert she should be careful about those little things."

Monsieur du Pré enjoyed the reputation of being most insatiable as well as the most harmless gossi Washington; he was also endowed with an inordi curiosity—indeed, his acquaintances regarded him walking interrogation-point, and were wont to assert his mustache curled upward solely to investigate shape of his nose, while that appendage, in turn, continually striving to ascertain the color of his eye

"Was von Wertman's engagement really such a to Miss Powell?" said Mr. Rivers curiously.

"Oh my dear fellow," returned the Frenchman eagerly, "did you not know? The poor lady! She had every reason to hope. He sought her constantly; bonbons, roses, and all the delicate environments of an *affaire de cœur* were hers for many weeks. She, herself, bloomed like a flower; grew young again—yes, positively girlish. Then, suddenly, what happened? Mrs. Irving announced the engagement of her daughter to Baron von Wertman of the German Embassy. Conceive the shock."

"Very shabby in von Wertman," said Mr. Rivers, laughing.

"And then," continued Monsieur du Pré pathetically, "the flower drooped; the girl grew all at once old and ugly. Is it not pitiful? I have watched her closely—most respectfully, of course, but closely. Day by day she has faded, until——"

"Upon my word," interrupted Senator Byrd, "I feel as though I had attended her obsequies. Will she be a second Elaine, du Pré, and go floating down the Potomac some fine day?"

"As I said," continued Monsieur du Pré volubly, "I watched her fade until at last I saw a subtle change. She revived. She lived once more. By a never-failing sign she now demonstrates her intention to cast aside the willow—she again powders her nose."

Senator Byrd turned to the man on his right as the laugh which followed Monsieur du Pré's last remark died away.

"Count Valdmir," he said courteously, "I hope you like terrapin; these are especially fine diamond-backs, and I particularly plume myself upon my recipe for cooking them. They are a distinctively American food,

I believe, therefore I have asked my friends from other countries to eat them. I was fortunate to secure you at such short notice."

"The good fortune is wholly mine," replied the Count politely.

Although he had but lately joined the Russian Embassy, Count Valdmir was already a popular member of the Diplomatic Corps and greatly in demand at all social functions. More than one damsel was known to watch ballroom doorways anxiously until he appeared, and he was pronounced,—

"So polished, my dear, so fascinatingly indifferent, and *so* irresistibly handsome, don't you know."

Count Valdmir's polish suggested the flash of steel to his associates in the world of diplomacy, and his handsome face did not disguise the fact that his eyes, set very close together, were stone gray in color and curiously keen and cold in expression. It was well known by the initiated that when an international crisis appeared inevitable, his duty generally called him to the seat of the trouble and detained him there until matters adjusted themselves. Therefore his sudden appearance in Washington was regarded as worthy of comment.

"Ah," exclaimed Monsieur du Pré as he tasted the terrapin, "is it not a dream—a poem? Confess, Count Valdmir, you have nothing in your country which compares with it."

"In many ways," said Count Valdmir slowly, "Russia cannot aspire to compete with America—in its women, for example."

"You are complimentary, Count," said Senator Byrd quietly; "as a nation we should feel flattered."

Monsieur du Pré raised his glass.

"To the American girl in general," he cried enthusiastically, "but especially to the most charming woman in Washington—Mrs. Redmond, gentlemen, Mrs. Redmond."

"To Mrs. Redmond," repeated Count Valdmir as they responded to the toast, "by all means. To Mrs. Redmond, the wife of the Secretary of State."

He drained his glass absently and replaced it upon the edge of the table, where it balanced for a moment and fell to the floor.

"A thousand pardons!" he exclaimed contritely. "I am stupid to-night; I fear it is broken."

"It perished in a good cause," said Mr. Rivers lightly. "I was more than half disposed to send mine after it."

"Yes, did it not?" said Monsieur du Pré. "I too had the same inclination. All women are, of course, attractive in some way,—some one feature, for instance, —but Mrs. Redmond is so altogether lovely——"

He paused in doubt for the proper word and waved his empty glass comprehensively.

An even greater air of festivity than usual prevailed in the grill-rooms. Jolly little parties of three and four filled the tables and tried their skill in cooking as they matched stories; laughter was genuine and spontaneous, for wit sparkled as brightly as the champagne and the stories were as highly seasoned as the food. Whatever sensations one might experience at the Alibi, one was rarely bored.

The quick trot of a horse and the sound of swiftly rolling wheels became audible above the general hum of conversation; their sudden cessation and the hasty

slam of a carriage-door announced the arrival of a belated guest.

"Yes," said Mr. Rivers discursively, "almost everyone comes here sooner or later. Over there in the corner, making Welsh-rarebit, is Judge Tucker of the Supreme Court; that little man cooking lobster à la Newberg is the editor of the Washington *Post;* that is the Speaker of the House dispensing mushrooms, and——"

"And," interrupted Monsieur du Pré suddenly, "here comes the Secretary of State."

Senator Byrd exchanged a quick glance with Mr. Rivers. The Secretary did not, as a rule, frequent the Alibi. Moreover, as they both knew, he had been engaged to dine at the White House that evening, and it was his invariable custom to go directly home from all dinners, no matter how early their conclusion, and the night had now grown very old indeed.

"As I was saying," resumed Mr. Rivers, addressing Count Valdmir, "everyone drifts in here at one time or another."

"Yes?" said the Russian politely.

The Secretary of State stood in the doorway and glanced anxiously about the room. His tall, spare figure had a commanding air in spite of the droop of hi shoulders, which proclaimed the scholar rather than t politician, while his long, slender hands betrayed peculiarly nervous organization. They were very less hands, continually busy over something, even tho it were only tearing bits of paper into strips or fol creases in his handkerchief. Just now, however, were so tightly clinched that the knuckles looked and prominent and the veins stood out like purpl

Senator Byrd laid down his fork.

"If you will excuse me," he remarked hastily, "I will go and speak to the Secretary; perhaps I can induce him to join us."

He threaded his way across the room, and the three men watched him silently. They observed the Secretary's relieved start and his quick remark, evidently an interrogation; also Senator Byrd's emphatic reply, apparently in the negative; and then they saw the Secretary speak earnestly for a moment and withdraw.

A sudden quiet had descended upon the Alibi. Here and there parties were dispersing, leaving empty tables with their usual unattractive *débris* in place of the glitter of plate and glass and the cheerful murmur of voices of an hour previous. Monsieur du Pré looked at his watch.

"So late!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "I too must be going."

He glanced expectantly at Count Valdmir, who also expressed surprise at the hour, and as Senator Byrd returned the two Attachés rose and, in spite of his protestations, took their leave. Mr. Rivers was about to join them, but delayed a moment in response to a slight touch upon his shoulder.

"The Secretary is outside in his carriage," said Senator Byrd quickly; "he wishes us to go home with him. There is something wrong at the Department."

The Secretary's coachman complied willingly with the brief command, "Home; drive quickly!" and deposited his passengers beneath the *porte-cochère* of a handsome stone house in short order. Secretary Redmond led the way at once to the library, where the fire still glowed red and inviting, while carefully shaded lamps cast a soft light very pleasing to the eye.

"Gentlemen," he said abruptly as he closed the door, "the Roostchook papers have been stolen."

"Let us discuss the matter in all its bearings," suggested Senator Byrd, breaking the long pause which succeeded the Secretary's announcement; "there may be some mistake."

"There is no mistake," returned Mr. Redmond positively; "yesterday I took them to the White House and went over the matter with the President. You were both present at the interview."

Mr. Rivers nodded.

"Well?" he said interrogatively.

"To-day at Cabinet meeting," resumed the Secretary, "the subject came up again and I made an appointment with the President for to-morrow; I was to take over the papers once more, also the plans of the outer defences of New York Harbor. I borrowed the latter from the Secretary of War; he sent them to my office by a messenger and my private secretary received and receipted for them. They were given in great detail. To-night I dined at the White House informally and the President again referred to the matter; it is, of course, uppermost in his mind just now. I volunteered to get all the papers from the Department without waiting for to-morrow. The safe was locked, as usual, also my desk. The papers were gone."

Somewhere outside a man whistled shrilly and a dog responded with a quick yelp of recognition.

"When I found them gone," resumed the Secretary slowly, "I remembered that you had called, Byrd, while I was absent this afternoon. I thought you might have borrowed them. It was not probable, of course, but it was possible."

"Not even possible," interrupted Senator Byrd.

"So I followed you to the Alibi," continued the Secretary; "the importance of the matter is my excuse. An international upheaval is imminent. France, England, and Russia are vitally interested in our policy; a representative of each of those countries has called at the Department to-day on one pretext or another."

The Secretary paused and moistened his lips; his fingers tapped the arm of his chair uneasily.

"You have the facts of the case," he said wearily; "the Roostchook papers are missing, and with them the plan of defence of our principal seaport."

An hour later the Senator and Member of Congress stood on the street corner and exchanged a few words before they separated. Over the city hung the mantle of intense silence which descends about three o'clock and remains until the break of day. The moon was setting, shining red and crooked through the fog, a piece lacking from one side proclaiming it was on the wane; it appeared somewhat as though the moon had made a night of it and would better retire as speedily as possible.

Mr. Rivers shivered and turned up his coat-collar, for the wind was cold and penetrating.

"It looks," he remarked as he lighted his cigar, "uncommonly black for the private secretary."

"I do not agree with you," returned Senator Byrd thoughtfully, "but, then, one never knows. Good-night."

And the two men walked quickly away in opposite directions.

The Secretary of State leaned his head against the back of his chair and closed his eyes. His face was gray with fatigue, and the lines about his mouth pronounced

and accentuated. He was undoubtedly very tired—so tired he did not hear the handle of the door turn softly, as though in response to a light touch; nor did he see it swing noiselessly open and a figure pause upon the threshold.

A woman.

She stood uncertainly for a moment, one hand upon the knob of the door while the other held together a white dressing-gown whose soft, clinging folds emphasized rather than concealed a form which would have given a sculptor keen delight. Her thick, dark hair, simply braided for the night, hung far below her waist, while little tendrils curled loosely about her ears and across her forehead. Her eyes possessed the rare quality of changing with her moods; just now they were widely opened under their black lashes and deeply purple, like the lustrous heart of a pansy, and her breath came quickly between softly parted red lips.

A woman to remember!

She crossed the room swiftly, her slippered feet making no sound upon the thick rug, and put her hand tentatively upon the Secretary's forehead.

"Estelle!" he exclaimed, suddenly opening his eyes. "You here?"

"Oh," she returned, with a little laugh which was half a sob, "I couldn't help coming, John. I thought something dreadful had happened."

"What could happen to me, here in my own house?"

"I don't know," she replied slowly; "one reads of terrible things. I lay there listening for your footstep and imagining I might never hear it again, until at last——"

"Why, you are cold and trembling, Estelle," inter-

rupted the Secretary, drawing her closer; "this will never do. I was detained by business, dear—a troublesome matter at the Department."

Mrs. Redmond knelt on the tiger-skin rug and held her pink-tinted palms towards the fire.

"I hate business," she said petulantly, "and I hate the old Department too. It takes you away from me, and I am jealous of it."

The Secretary smiled and passed his hand caressingly over her dark hair.

"You are losing your beauty-sleep, my dear," he remarked fondly; "to-morrow you will be pale and languid, and it will be my fault."

Mrs. Redmond settled herself into a comfortable bunch upon the rug and leaned her head against her husband's knee. The flowing sleeve of her gown fell back, displaying her white, rounded arm with its delicate tracery of blue veins, and the Secretary stooped and pressed his lips against it. Truly Monsieur du Pré was correct in his statement—Mrs. Redmond was altogether lovely.

"I'm going to bask in the firelight," she said quietly, "while you tell me all about your bothersome business. I like to share your thoughts, you know, even if they are not very pleasant. Tell me all about it, dear."

So he told her the story of the lost papers and she listened silently, giving the hand she held an occasional sympathetic pressure and following his words closely. And the Secretary felt vaguely reassured; the matter seemed much less serious and imperative, considered with his young wife's head against his knee and her two soft, warm hands holding his closely, than it had done when he followed Senator Byrd to the Alibi.

So the worn look gradually faded from his face, and

a new light shone in his eyes, as they sat for some minutes in that unbroken and blissful silence only possible to kindred spirits. After a while Mrs. Redmond stirred a little.

"We are very happy, John, aren't we?" she said dreamily.

"Happy in each other, dear," he responded gently.

"Happy in each other," she repeated softly, "and, after all, does anything else matter?"

The fire had grown gray and ashy and she shivered slightly.

"I love these unexpected little talks we have now and then," she said brightly; "they seem like stolen pleasures somehow. But you are so tired to-night, poor dear! Put out the lights and go to bed; it must be almost morning. You must hold my hand, though, for I am afraid of the dark to-night and of several other things, so hold it very tightly, John."

II

ALTHOUGH the dissipated moon had sunk low in the heavens, it was not too far gone to keep an eye upon the affairs of earth. The moon cherished a belief, the result of many centuries of observation, that mankind was very similar the world over, but it liked to keep watch, nevertheless.

Consequently it pursued Count Valdmir as he parted from Monsieur du Pré at the door of the Alibi and hailed a passing hansom; and when he drove swiftly away it still followed curiously.

The Potomac shimmered and glittered as the moon looked at it, and the Virginia hills rose dark and indistinct against the horizon. Under the Long Bridge, however, the river crawled black and sullen, washing against its supports with a steady, cold persistence. On one side of the bridge lay Washington with its stately buildings and broad avenues—Washington, the seat of government, the nucleus of law and order. On the other lay Jackson City with its squalid hovels and muddy road —Jackson City, the seat of wickedness, the germ of lawlessness and disorder. Between the two flowed the Potomac, and the bridge connected them.

It was late, even for Jackson City, and in one of the small gambling-saloons only the proprietor and a solitary guest remained. The host was frankly and tearfully drunk; the visitor was coldly and disgustedly sober.

"Now attend," he said sharply, bringing out his words with a stinging emphasis not unlike the snap of a whip.

"I'm a poor man," whined the proprietor, clutching a pile of dirty notes and coin which lay upon the table, "a very poor man. I work for my living."

The hand which snatched at the money was long and shapely; it had once been well cared for too, and even now, shaking and grimy as it was, suggested the hand of a gentleman.

The face and figure were those of a man grown old in dissipation and poisoned with the dregs of life—a man sunk to the level of his surroundings. Yet at times an indefinable air of birth and breeding asserted itself and demanded recognition, as though to illustrate what nature had intended to create before man interfered and spoiled her handiwork.

"And I am here to give you money," said the guest imperturbably. "I see you are not too drunk to understand that. Do you know me?"

"Yes," said the other, raising his head suddenly, "yes, Count Valdmir, I know you well."

"And I also," returned Count Valdmir, whose identity had thus far been ingeniously veiled, "have the pleasure of knowing you intimately, Colonel Albert St. John."

The coins rattled in the trembling hand and one or two fell unnoticed to the floor.

"You are not without fame, Colonel," resumed Count Valdmir politely, his eyes contracting strangely; "the police of several countries would be glad to be informed of your whereabouts. It was quite a coincidence that you should have been standing in your doorway the day

I chanced to ride past. My memory for faces is excellent, and I am accustomed to meeting people in unexpected places; therefore I recognized you at once."

An inarticulate snarl was the only reply.

"In Germany," continued Count Valdmir, holding up his hand and checking the different countries on his fingers, "in France, and in England you are anxiously expected. Also in Russia."

The partly sobered man endeavored to collect himself.

"What do you want?" he asked, with a sort of grim courage. "You did not come here to-night to warn me that you meant to inform upon me."

Count Valdmir glanced about the dingy room, with its array of unwashed glasses and dirty floor, and shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"The last time I had the pleasure of talking with you was in Berlin," he said reflectively; "the salon was undoubtedly larger and the lights perhaps more brilliant, also your dress was then immaculate. But your occupation was much the same. I presume you have, as usual, neglected the formality of a 'license.'"

"I raise chickens," interrupted the other hurriedly; "a license is not required."

"Just so," said Count Valdmir suavely, "you raise chickens, of course. A strange occupation for Colonel Albert St. John, is it not?"

Colonel St. John collapsed suddenly into his chair, his few minutes of sobriety vanished and his chin quivering miserably.

"I'm a poor man," he repeated, his voice returning to its habitual whine, "a very poor man. I must live."

A lamp flickered and went out; the air was fetid with kerosene and stale tobacco, and heat radiated visibly

from the air-tight stove now red hot at its base. Living arrangements in Jackson City were strangely primitive considering its location.

Count Valdmir flung open the door and raised the window, regardless of a faint protest from his companion.

"Bah," he exclaimed, "no wonder you are stupid; it is the atmosphere. Now listen, Colonel St. John."

He paused suddenly.

"By the way," he resumed slowly, "in which army do you hold your commission? You used to serve the country that paid the highest price—and served it well too. My compliments to you, Colonel. You are at times invaluable to me and I rejoice to have discovered your retreat, although I still believe you the greatest rascal unhung. It is a pity you should have descended to this. That unfortunate contretemps at Berlin was the beginning of your ill-luck, was it not? You lived in a good deal of luxury there, I remember—you and your daughter."

The chill air from the river came in the window and ruffled the gray hair of the sodden heap of humanity huddled in the chair beside the table.

"What do you want me to do?" he said dully, passing his hand across his brow. "You must speak plainly, for my head is heavy to-night."

But Count Valdmir did not reply at once. He waited until the cold night wind had done its work more effectually.

"Colonel St. John," he said at last, leaning forward and speaking very slowly, "where is your daughter?"

The old man made a gesture as though he would ward off a blow.

"You don't like to speak of her? Well, one can hardly wonder. You decamped in the night from Paris, I believe, leaving her alone and without money; it was a most fatherly act. Also she was to bear the consequences when the police appeared. What became of her?"

"How should I know?" returned the other sullenly. "How should *I* know?"

"True," agreed Count Valdmir politely, "how should you? It may, however, interest you to learn that Lyndhurst is in town."

"In Washington?"

"Even so. He is attached to the British Embassy and has just arrived. I fancy he still remembers; men of his type do not forget easily. Young Hertford was his cousin; he paid his debts and sent his body home to his mother. It was Lyndhurst who hunted you down at Paris."

"*She* did it," muttered this model father; "it was her work, not mine. Let him look for her."

"And who taught her the trade she followed? Who forced her to use her youth and beauty to decoy men to your house that you might fleece them? Who encouraged her to lure them on to love her and perhaps confide in her, while she in turn betrayed their confidence to you? No doubt she was an apt pupil, but who instilled the rudiments of treachery and deceit into her mind before she could speak plainly?"

A clock in the next room struck three, rattling out the time like a series of small explosions.

"I must reluctantly tear myself away," he continued regretfully. "Your secret as well as your existence is safe with me, Colonel St. John. Not even Lyndhurst

shall suspect it as long as you perform an occasional trifling service for me, for which you will be well paid. Now attend carefully to what I say."

He spoke slowly and emphatically for some minutes, while the old man listened with a strained intentness painful to witness.

"I am not what I once was," he interrupted at last deprecatingly; "my hand shakes; I cannot trust it. And my nerve fails me when I least expect it."

Count Valdmir made an imperative gesture commanding silence and proceeded with his instructions.

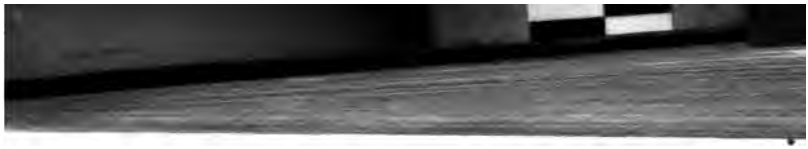
"Now understand," he concluded sternly, "I hold your safety, perhaps your life, in my keeping. You pay a heavy penalty for failure, therefore be careful."

"I understand," repeated the other mechanically.

"Then I will not detain you further; I shall return before very long. It is almost time to feed your chickens, Colonel. Good-night, or, rather, good-morning."

Entering the waiting hansom he drove rapidly away towards Washington without a backward glance.

The old man stood in the door and watched the retreating vehicle, which looked strangely black and misshapen in the uncertain light. As the echo of the quick trot upon the bridge grew less distinct he clinched his hand tightly, and raising his trembling fist shook it in the empty air. Returning to the house, he closed the window and, sinking into a chair, succumbed to the physical collapse inevitable to men of his type after strong mental excitement. His head fell forward on his breast and he breathed heavily, his brow moist and clammy with beads of cold perspiration standing out upon it. A delicious sense of oblivion enveloped him, and his body surged forward dangerously.



Colonel St. John was asleep.

Asleep with his gray head upon the notched and rickety table, and with the little heap of ill-gained money forgotten and unnoticed. Suddenly his face softened and a singularly sweet smile changed its whole expression.

"My dear," he said in a full, cultivated voice, stretching out his hand appealingly, "you look remarkably well to-night. That gown suits you to perfection."

Colonel St. John was dreaming.

Count Valdmir dismissed his hansom and inserted his latchkey in the door of his apartment. He was thoroughly chilled by his drive across the Potomac, and the sight of an armchair by the grate where the coals still glowed was not unattractive. A table within easy reach held matches and cigars, also a decanter and a small glass. His valet knew his business thoroughly and had been with him a long time. Rapidly getting into smoking-jacket and slippers, he sank luxuriously into the depths of the chair, selected a cigar, and proceeded to carefully review the events of the past few hours.

The fire glowed and faded, the moon disappeared entirely, and the wheels of enterprising milk-carts rattled loudly in the street below before he rose and stretched himself wearily.

"A good night's work," he remarked, yawning.

Filling the slender-stemmed glass, he held it critically towards the light.

"To Mrs. Redmond!" he exclaimed as he put it to his lips; "to Mrs. Redmond, the wife of the Secretary of State!"

A slight crash followed and the fragments of the little glass mingled with the ashes on the hearth.

III

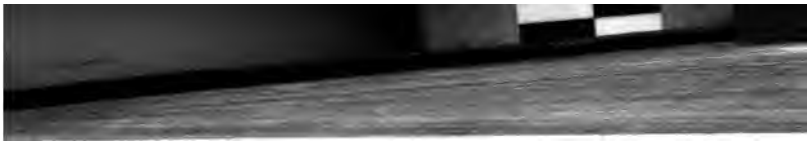
When David Leigh secured an appointment under the government he believed himself very fortunate. It really seemed providential that the private secretary to the Secretary of State should resign just at the conclusion of the trip abroad which had followed his graduation at Yale, and while he was still uncertain whether Fate intended him to become a bright and shining light in the literary world or remain an obscure reporter on a New York daily; secretly, he inclined to the former belief, for twenty-five is a somewhat egotistical age even with the best of us. Moreover, he was decidedly elated at securing his present position; it had all been so easy.

"I can get the billet for you if you want it," his uncle had remarked, "and I advise you to take it. Such places are good stepping-stones to better things; they don't go begging, so you would better grab while the bag is open."

And he had grabbed eagerly.

The selection of a place to live had been rather difficult, and it was a month after he had entered upon his duties in the Department before he could summon courage to apply for admittance to the select and exclusive boarding-house to which he had been recommended.

"I am the widow of a Southern gentleman, Mr. Leigh, who lost his all in the Civil War," said the im-



posing personage who presented herself in response to his request for the lady of the house, "and I *do* take a few paying guests. I always require to know something of their antecedents, however, but, of course, your connection with the State Department is a sufficient credential, so I will make an exception in your favor and waive further reference."

David thought himself uncommonly lucky and thanked her profusely as he clinched the bargain, quite unconscious that the lady herself was equally anxious to come to an agreement.

"I have let the north room at last, Mary," she remarked to her maid, "and for my own price too."

"Well," responded Mary, who appeared to be a depressing companion, "I wish him joy of his bargain, Ma'am. He'll freeze in winter and roast in summer, not to mention havin' to light the gas every mornin' when he dresses. He won't stay long, and I wouldn't neither if I could get what was owin' me—so there, Mrs. Colson."

"It's very unkind in you to speak so, Mary," returned Mrs. Colson, immediately dissolved in tears. "My father owned a hundred slaves, and I never even tied my own shoestring until I came to Washington."

The necessity of tying her shoes herself always weighed very heavily upon Mrs. Colson when placed in an awkward position. Her house was large and conveniently situated and therefore generally well filled, with the usual preponderance of indigent widows and spinsters of uncertain age. David found himself the object of close scrutiny as he took his seat at the breakfast-table and felt rather embarrassed in consequence. He had not yet learned that the advent of a young man is an

occasion of breathless interest in the average boarding-house.

Mrs. Colson received him with a welcoming smile and at once introduced everyone within earshot, adding items of interest concerning them in parenthesis after each name.

"Miss Jackson, Mr. Leigh (a cousin of Stonewall Jackson); Miss Madison (a connection of Dolly Madison and named for her); Mr. Reyburn (one of our first families and head of a division in the Agricultural Department); Mrs. Rowen (niece of James Monroe and born in the White House); Miss Gray, Mr. Leigh, and Miss Christine Gray (our newest guests except yourself); Mr. Marks (our Scientist—connected with the Smithsonian)."

Mrs. Colson paused for breath and looked about the room.

"Mr. Leigh himself," she remarked, launching her *pièce de resistance*, "is the private secretary of the Secretary of State."

David made a series of bows as the names were mentioned, and finally subsided into his chair, feeling flushed and uncomfortable.

"Will you kindly pass the salt?" said the cousin of Stonewall Jackson, who sat at his right.

"I'll thank you for the pepper," murmured the White House Baby at his left.

David salted and peppered the ladies and ventured to look about him. He found himself being calmly considered by two large brown eyes, the property of Miss Christine Gray, his *vis-à-vis*. He was relieved to find her young and glad that she was pretty.

She was very pretty indeed, was Miss Christine, with

the charm of youth and the brilliant coloring which suggests fresh air and plenty of it. Mr. Marks sat beside her and struggled bravely to be entertaining, but small-talk was not his strong point. Deep down within his scientific heart something had recently stirred which both annoyed and surprised him, but he responded to its dictates and endeavored to be chatty and agreeable.

"Have you ever happened to calculate the percentage of mosquitoes which have never tasted blood?" he inquired by way of setting the ball rolling as he slowly stirred his coffee.

"No," returned Christine, her dimples suddenly in evidence, "but I expect you could tell me the exact number."

Mr. Marks entirely forgot to reply as he pondered over her words; he was often dimly aware that her most innocent remarks admitted of two constructions, and that his fellow-boarders frequently showed a disposition to become hilarious when he, himself, failed to detect the joke. Christine now applied herself to her breakfast and relapsed into silence. Evidently, thought Mr. Marks, mosquitoes did not interest her; he would try again.

"Have you ever considered," he remarked casually, "how much better it would be if the human race existed upon one sort of food only? This multiplicity of viands is bad for the stomach."

Mr. Marks frequently referred to that portion of his anatomy, and always with great respect.

"I don't think I would like it at all," replied Christine promptly. "One kind of food served constantly would become absolutely hateful."

Mr. Marks again cogitated for some minutes. He

wished to prove his quickness at repartee, and took advantage of a general lull in the conversation to do so.

"*Does butter?*" he demanded in sepulchral tones.

And Christine, meeting an irrespressible twinkle in David's eye, laughed outright and precipitately left the table.

A few minutes later David encountered her in the hall, her hands full of letters and papers, which she scanned anxiously and impatiently flung upon the table.

"It has not come, Molly," she said to her sister. "There is something for everyone in the house except ourselves. And yet he promised you, didn't he?"

"Never mind, Christine," said Miss Gray gently, "he may have forgotten. Congressmen are so busy, you know."

The two girls went on upstairs, and David emerged from the house simultaneously with the connection of Stonewall Jackson and the White House Baby. Both ladies carried brown paper packages three by four inches in size, each containing two sandwiches and a slice of cake. Force of circumstances obliged them to spend their days within the restricting walls of the Treasury Department, and naturally robust appetites clamored for satisfaction as the noon hour approached, but their aristocratic lineage demanded that such bodily nourishment be genteelly compressed into the smallest space possible.

Miss Jackson drew the ends of her thick veil together and sighed depressingly.

"It's a lovely morning, isn't it?" ventured David as the trio walked briskly down the street.

"Is it?" she responded from the depths of the veil. "I'm sure I had not noticed. When one spends one's

days bending over a desk, one does not care whether the sun shines or not."

David had a guilty feeling that he should not have introduced the subject of the weather and digressed to a safer topic.

"What a beautiful city Washington is," he remarked impersonally as they crossed Lafayette Park.

"I see nothing beautiful in it," responded the White House Baby, looking with contemptuous eyes at the place of her birth. "I count money all day long in the basement of the Treasury and dream again of counting it at night. That's all Washington represents to me—to be herded into a badly ventilated room with people absolutely indifferent to the prerogatives of a lady. Why, if you'll believe me, Mr. Leigh, the men in those offices don't even think of rising when I enter the room, and I am actually allowed to pick up my own handkerchief and put on my overshoes unassisted! Such things were unheard of before the war."

She paused a moment, then added in a faint, mincing voice,—

"And *I* was born in the White House."

David murmured an apology for the delinquencies of his sex and felt decidedly uncomfortable.

"It jars upon one's sensibilities," observed Miss Jackson, taking up the refrain in a minor chord as she picked her way daintily across the street, "to be brought into such close daily contact with one's inferiors. One cannot touch pitch and remain undefiled, and I feel I owe to the United States Government a marked deterioration of a naturally fine character—a coarsening, as it were, of the delicate and sensitive fibres so essential to the happiness of our sex. We well-born women are

merely sensitive plants, Mr. Leigh; we shrivel and contract in an uncongenial atmosphere or at a careless touch."

It occurred to David, as he raised his hat and parted from the sensitive plants, that they also owed to the United States Government the roof which sheltered them, not to mention food and raiment. He had yet to learn that they were merely a type to be found in almost every boarding-house and department in Washington, and by no means represented the army of women who work quietly and conscientiously, to whom they are an inestimable disadvantage.

It was customary for the Secretary to reach his office about ten o'clock, therefore, when David was informed that he had already arrived and wished to see Mr. Leigh as soon as the latter appeared, he obeyed the summons with astonishment.

Mr. Redmond sat before his desk in his private office. A wood-fire snapped and blazed cheerfully behind the brass wire screen, its dancing light reflected on the dark, polished wood of the handsome mantel; the wintry sun shone with all the vigor it possessed through the large south windows which overlooked the wide expanse known as The Mall, with the Potomac winding its sluggish way towards the ocean and the hills of old Virginia standing in irregular array against the horizon.

The view from his office windows was a constant source of pleasure to the Secretary, but to-day he had not even glanced at the Washington Monument, the matchless symmetry and dignified simplicity of whose shaft gratified his artistic tendencies.

"Mr. Leigh," he said abruptly as David appeared,

omitting the usual morning salutation, "I want the Roostchook papers. Where are they?"

David hesitated perceptibly.

"I left them in your desk, sir," he replied slowly, "under the bronze weight in the left-hand drawer, with other confidential papers."

The Secretary was nervously bending a paper-knife between his fingers, and David watched it mechanically.

"Mr. Leigh," he continued, bringing out his words with an obvious effort, "you are the custodian of correspondence coming into your possession, especially in my absence. This matter is of grave importance. The papers are gone as well as the plan of New York Harbor. I believe them to have been stolen. The War Department has your signed receipt for the plan of defence I borrowed; I myself handed you the other papers to read. The responsibility would seem to rest with you."

A messenger entered the room, replenished the fire, and retired quietly. David watched with apparent interest the shower of sparks which ensued before the fresh log blazed up brightly amid the charred fragments of its predecessors.

"The responsibility," repeated the Secretary quietly, "rests with you."

A dead silence followed as David gradually grasped the situation. In the corridor without the sound of passing feet could be heard and an occasional careless laugh penetrated through the closed door; a ray of sunshine fell directly upon the large glass inkstand, compelling the eye to involuntarily focus upon it and be dazzled in consequence; and the click of a typewriter in an adjoining room was distinctly audible.

David mechanically noted these details as he watched the paper-knife bend double in the Secretary's hands.

It snapped suddenly, and the tension relaxed somewhat. Mr. Redmond leaned back in his chair and looked keenly at his private secretary. He saw a man, tall, broad-shouldered, and well set up, after the manner of college athletes, young, almost boyish in appearance, with no apparent realization of the serious aspect of the position, and his eybrows met in a heavy frown of disapproval. But he looked again at the firm outline of the face before him, with its clean-cut mouth and square chin; he noted the clear blue eyes, candid yet vaguely troubled, which met his searching gaze unflinchingly, and the Secretary looked a third time and changed his firmly grounded opinion. He believed himself a judge of character.

"Have you any theory as to the disappearance of the papers?" he inquired deliberately.

"Not yet," returned David quietly, the squareness of his lower jaw suddenly accentuated, "but I *shall* have in time."

The Secretary rose and walked slowly up and down the room in silence, with his hands clasped behind his back and his fingers tightly interlaced. Suddenly he paused and laid his hand upon the younger man's shoulder.

"Mr. Leigh," he said with an entire change of manner, "I am much troubled about this matter, and, no doubt, I seem irritable and unjust, but I trust you will be patient. I must go to the bottom of it myself, of course, but I need your help. My grasp on things is not what it once was; it is a penalty we all pay to advancing years."

The Secretary paused and looked anxiously into the blue eyes on a level with his own.

"You will help me, I am sure," he said gently. "I may depend on you, may I not?"

"I will do my best," said David gravely.

IV

CHRISTINE GRAY, dressed for the street, stood in Mrs. Colson's third-story back meditating deeply. Her white forehead was drawn into an anxious furrow as she surveyed herself in the little mirror, but she finally breathed a relieved sigh. The result was satisfactory. Christine had resolved upon decisive and independent action, and felt that much might depend upon creating a favorable impression in the beginning; she had observed that the impressions she created were apt to be favorable, but, notwithstanding this fact, she continued to pay great attention to details. A bunch of violets floated on the top of the water-pitcher, vases being unavailable at Mrs. Colson's except in the parlor, and she critically tried their effect against her black coat; they looked extremely well.

"On the whole," observed Christine, regretfully returning them to the water-pitcher, "on the whole, I think it would be better not to wear them. He might draw conclusions which would not be to my advantage."

She drew a long breath as she set out for the street, and felt very important and withal a bit frightened as she hailed a passing car and started for the Capitol. Christine was about to make her first attempt at lobbying, and was not at all certain how to go about it. She had, of course, been to the Senate and House when sightseeing, but they had failed to impress her upon that

occasion with the sense of awe they inspired to-day. The magnitude of any object, animate or inanimate, depends largely upon the point of view from which one regards it and the reason one has for approaching it. No doubt we have all seen molehills develop into mountains and shirked climbing them in consequence.

Christine disliked the way the watchman looked at her as she entered the rotunda; he was quite innocent of any ulterior meaning, but she immediately felt he knew why she was there, and that his glance was compassionate and superior. She inquired her way to the House in as haughty a manner as she could command, hoping thereby to crush him and establish her social status beyond all question.

She accosted the doorkeeper of the public gallery a little timidly. Could he tell her whether Mr. Rivers, of Virginia, was there? He could; the gentleman was then upon the floor of the House. Should he take her card? Christine, inwardly quaking, produced her bit of pasteboard and followed the guide summoned to conduct her to the Marble Room.

One is inclined to wonder sometimes how many women have waited there in years past, and what tales of good and evil the dignified walls could repeat if they felt so inclined; and to wonder, also, how many will wait there in years to come, and what secrets will be entrusted to the polished stone. Perhaps they will be more innocent than many of those now inscribed, and the hearts they reflect more guileless and unsullied than some reflected in the past.

Mr. Rivers, of Virginia, entered hastily. He was obviously annoyed as he looked from the card in his hand at the different women assembled there, and said

something to the watchman, who shook his head helplessly, speculating inwardly why he should be supposed to know one woman from another by intuition.

Christine rose nervously and stepped forward.

"Mr. Rivers?" she said interrogatively.

"Miss Gray?" he returned with similar intonation, and a pause ensued.

"I sent a reply to your letter this morning," he resumed briskly; "you would have received it this afternoon had you waited."

"No," said Christine quietly, "I should not, for I have not written to you."

Mr. Rivers was surprised, and consequently took his first look at his visitor; he took a second and longer observation immediately.

"You see," said Christine, plunging desperately into her subject, as one swallows a bad dose quickly to have it over with, "you see, your letter was for my sister, and she——"

"She asked an appointment under the Government," said Mr. Rivers; "quite so. I have many such letters. However, I wrote her this morning I hoped to be able to secure something for her before very long. In consideration of my past obligations to your father I put her claim before many others."

"Yes," said Christine incoherently, "that's just what I came about. Please don't give it to her."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Rivers, such requests being somewhat new to him.

"At least," she continued, "I don't mean just that. Won't you give it to me instead? It can't make any difference to you, and it does make a great deal of difference to me. Just use my name instead of hers."

"My dear Miss Gray!" he ejaculated.

"Oh, dear," sighed Christine mournfully, "now I've got all mixed up, and you don't understand a bit. You see it's this way. Mary don't want to go into office; you know she's a trained nurse, and adores bandages and chloroform and all those things I hate."

Christine paused for breath and Mr. Rivers smiled indulgently. The annoyed expression had vanished, also the curt, hurried intonation of his voice.

"And so," resumed Christine, "if you give it to me, Mary can go to her bandages and her disinfectants with a clear conscience."

"Do you think you would like office life?" inquired Mr. Rivers curiously. "You do not impress me as one who would take very kindly to the monotony and confinement it entails."

"Oh, I sha'n't mind," returned the girl absently, adding in a voice she strove to make careless but in which the note of keen anxiety was dominant, "then you will give it to me?"

"There is a trifling impediment," said Mr. Rivers slowly, "the examination, you know."

"But I took it when Mary did," cried Christine, much relieved. "I thought that I told you. And I passed too; not so well as she did, of course, but still I passed."

"You say your sister really prefers nursing?" inquired Mr. Rivers, visibly wavering.

"Yes," said Christine eagerly, "she does indeed, and I do so want to be independent."

"Miss Gray," said Mr. Rivers solemnly, "you bring very powerful influence to bear to gain your point. The pressure has proved too much for me."

"I brought no one," said Christine indignantly, "I am quite alone."

"Yes," said Mr. Rivers, laughingly, "I see you are. Your strength does not lie in numbers, Miss Gray. If you can make my peace with your sister, you may regard the matter as settled, so far as I am concerned."

"I ought to thank you, I suppose," said Christine, "but I don't quite know what to say."

"I wish," said Mr. Rivers gravely, "that I was offering you something better. The War Department at sixty dollars a month is not much to be thankful for, Miss Gray."

"It is just that much better than nothing, Mr. Rivers."

"Your appointment will be sent immediately," he remarked as he shook her hand cordially. "I shall be interested to hear how you get on. If you have any trouble, let me know. My obligations to your father, Miss Gray——"

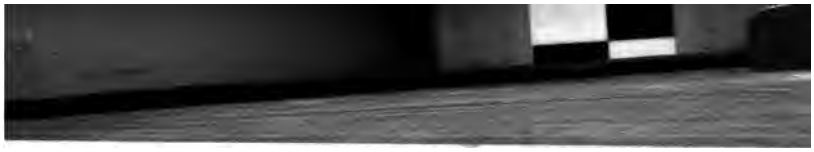
Mr. Rivers paused abruptly, guiltily aware that the sight of the daughter had increased these obligations surprisingly, and proposed that he should furnish her with a card of admission to the private gallery of the House.

Christine felt as though she were walking on air as she went down the steps of the Capitol. The interview so long meditated, and privately much dreaded, had proved not unpleasant, after all.

"It is much better," she remarked aloud, "to see persons than to write to them; I always told Mary that."

A long-legged youth with a twinkle in his gray eyes fell into step beside her and gravely removed his hat.

"Poor Mary," he said sadly, "I feel for her; she is told so many things."



"It certainly would be a pleasant change to go somewhere and not have you suddenly appear," remarked Christine with some asperity.

"Well," said the boy seriously, "you'll have that pleasure soon, I think, Christine. I've been notified that I passed the examination, so I'm sure of my commission at last. I don't know yet what regiment I'm assigned to, but I hope for the cavalry. Of course, there's no telling where I may be sent, but I will know shortly."

"Oh Harry," she said breathlessly, "not really?"

"Really and truly, Christine."

The girl paused on the lower step and laid an appealing hand upon his arm, quite regardless of the people in the street below.

"Harry," she said gently, "I didn't mean it, you know, about not wanting to see you. Of course, I was joking. You understand, don't you?"

And probably Harry understood, for he pressed the little hand gratefully and suggested that they go into the Congressional Library and talk things over quietly.

An hour later two self-conscious but important-looking young people emerged from the Library and walked slowly down the street.

"I don't like it, you know," he said positively, "the idea of you in an office! but just as soon as I can get on my feet a little I'm coming back for you."

"Oh Harry," she said with a little gasp, "it does seem ridiculous to think that it's you and me, doesn't it?"

"Don't let's take the car yet," he suggested as she paused on the corner, "we have so much to talk about and so little time to talk."

"When you come back, Harry," she remarked as they

strolled slowly on, "I shall be quite a staid old office person—like Miss Jackson, for instance."

"Christine," he exclaimed suddenly, "suppose we don't wait. Of course, I haven't much money and don't know where I am going, but we could manage somehow almost anywhere. Come with me, Christine."

The girl shook her head gravely.

"No, Harry," she said, "it wouldn't be right. You know we settled all that in the Library. You have to buy your uniforms and things, and they do cost such a lot. I think it's very mean to give second lieutenants such little salaries. I'm sure it's a very important position for a man to occupy, and he ought to be paid accordingly."

And undoubtedly all second lieutenants would heartily endorse this opinion.

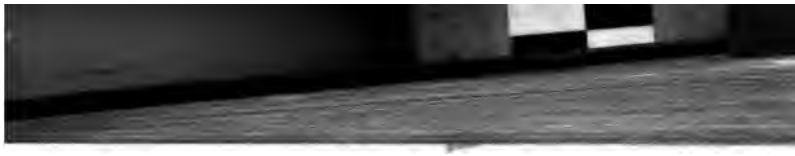
"But," she continued brightly, "the time will soon pass, for we will both be busy. And then when you feel that it's right for you to do it,—really *right*, Harry, —why, you can tell me so. And when you come back——"

"Well, Christine?"

A mist formed before her eyes and obscured surrounding objects, but she brushed it aside impatiently.

"Why, then," she replied with a little break in her voice, "you will find me ready for my marching orders, *General* Fielding."

And the paradise especially prepared for the young and hopeful opened its gates before them, plainly visible and apparently easy of access. We have all looked at the western sky when the sun was setting; we have seen its scarlet and gold merge into the purple horizon, and the gray, leaden clouds change suddenly into a canopy



of glory; and we have thought, because we could not help it, about another world whose streets are golden and its gates precious jewels. It seems very near—that other world; we can almost reach the portal, which will open at the touch of a finger, and involuntarily we stretch out our hands.

And then we realize the distance. The light begins to fade, and we look down at the ploughed fields and muddy ways we must cross and feel discouraged. For we know, beyond all doubt, we will be tired when we get there—too tired to care very much about anything; we know also that the gates are not jewels after all, but iron and tightly locked; and we fear our hands are not quite strong enough to turn the key. We are sure of this because the sun has set, and we are no longer blinded by its radiance.

But the boy and girl, whose combined summers numbered little more than forty, looked across the expanse of intervening time at their goal, illumined until it shone distinct and beautiful against its misty background of uncertainty. They did not think of the time which might elapse before they achieved it; nor did they realize that this time must be lived day by day, hour by hour, and that life is sometimes difficult and always perplexing. They saw their paradise clearly. Its way lay straight before them, and they entertained no doubts of reaching it at last. Why, indeed, should they?

V

THE Secretary of State and Mrs. Redmond stood at the door of the ballroom to receive their guests.

Without, a fine white mist fell steadily. The street was wet and slippery, with the light of many carriage lamps reflected on its shining asphalt, and coachmen swore roundly as they huddled on their boxes, sullen lumps of misery, while across the park and down the wide avenue the east wind hurried breathlessly.

Within, Persian rugs and rich hangings glowed in the radiance of many lights; the air was moist and warm, and heavy with the scent of roses; while up the wide staircase and through the spacious rooms surged the endless stream of humanity.

"One always sees the people one wants to see at Mrs. Redmond's, don't you know?" remarked a gilded youth of Washington when asked why he never allowed a previous engagement to interfere with his acceptance of her invitations. And his argument was admitted as sound.

The Secretary was tired. For what seemed to him an interminable period he had been exchanging polite inanities with one person after another. Fat women melted into thin women; gray-haired men replaced callow youths; statesmen stepped upon the skirts of *débutantes;* diplomats followed one another in quick succession, and still they came. The Secretary wondered

vaguely whether he looked as bored as the man who announced the guests, and felt a sympathy for him.

"The Chinese Minister and Mrs. Chang!" shouted that factotum, and the little lady tottered along on her useless stumps of feet in the wake of her burly lord and master, a round spot of bright red paint on either cheek and a large yellow chrysanthemum over each ear. Mrs. Chang in her gorgeous oriental dress and speaking her pretty broken English was a welcome addition to all social functions.

Monsieur du Pré had arrived in good season and now stood where he could command a view of his hostess unobserved by her. It was Monsieur du Pré's theory that when any one of his senses was pleasantly affected it should be gratified as often as possible; therefore he meant on this occasion to indulge his eyes whenever practicable.

"Does she not surpass herself to-night?" he exclaimed rapturously. "Is she not superb? And then her jewels. *Mon Dieu!* Her jewels."

And, indeed, Mrs. Redmond justified his enthusiasm. Her white satin gown was cut with a severity of style well adapted to display her graceful figure to the best advantage. An arch of diamonds spanned her dark hair, supporting a crescent of flawless opals which radiated rays of fire with every motion of her head, while a string of diamonds encircled her neck, one large, curiously shaped opal forming a pendant which alternately glowed and paled upon her white throat. About her waist was a girdle composed of close, flexible links of dull gold heavily studded with opals, each stone being set in diamond points. Mrs. Redmond's jewels were the envy of her feminine acquaintances, but the

priceless opals were the wonder and admiration of all Washington.

"How hot it is!" observed a dowager in purple satin to one in black as the rooms filled rapidly.

"My dear," returned the other confidentially, "I assure you that nothing in the world but the fear of disappointing Isabel lured me from my chimney-corner tonight. These crushes are most unsatisfactory, don't you think so?"

"Isabel looks extremely well this evening," remarked the first speaker pleasantly; "she is quite the prettiest girl in the room. Now I had to pilot *my* niece through four seasons—one whole administration—before I got her settled, but I fancy you won't have the same experience."

"Well, I don't know," was the doubtful response, "this is her second season, and neither Isabel nor her father seem to realize the importance of an early and advantageous marriage for a girl. "'My dear,' I often say to her, 'as time passes your roses fade and your chances grow less'—— By the way"—interrupting herself hastily—"who is that being presented to her?"

Two pairs of gold lorgnettes were levelled upon the unconscious man as he bowed to Isabel and carelessly straightened the flower in his buttonhole.

"I think," said she of the purple satin with renewed interest, "that it is the Hon. Cecil Lyndhurst, one of the new British Attachés. A great catch, my dear. Second son, old baronial estates, title in prospect, and all that sort of thing. Isabel could not do better."

"Indeed," said the careful aunt thoughtfully, "*in*deed!"

The lorgnettes were dropped and fans resumed.

"The Secretary begins to show his age, don't you think so, Mrs. Chesley?" said the purple satin, dexterously concealing a yawn; "he looks tired, but Mrs. Redmond is as fresh as a daisy still. The difference in years is very marked to-night."

"My dear Mrs. Layton," replied Mrs. Chesley acidly, "I hear she once made her own living. I think she was abroad with some family as governess, or maybe it was companion, when he first knew her."

"Now I'm sure you are wrong, Mrs. Chesley," interrupted Mrs. Layton eagerly. "I have it on good authority that she had gone to Germany to study music, and that it was her playing which first attracted him."

"Was it?" said Mrs. Chesley indifferently. "Well, anyway, he married her over there and brought her home. He was then in the Senate, you know, and I remember that there was a good deal of disappointment among the mothers about it,—quite naturally,—we have *so* few eligibles in Washington."

And the fans waved slowly to and fro as the conversation drifted into other channels.

Miss Isabel Byrd, although in her second season, was still suspected of attending balls simply for the pleasure of dancing, and the fact that she was often obliged to divide her favors spoke volumes for her popularity in a city where dancing men were at a premium and hostesses frequently driven to the verge of distraction to provide expectant damsels with even an occasional partner. She was merely a thoroughly healthy, happy American girl, ignorant of care or responsibility, and had never in her life lost an hour's sleep except when she had the measles. Why should she not enjoy every moment of her existence?

"Thank you," said the Hon. Cecil Lyndhurst as the waltz ended, "it was delightful."

"Yes, wasn't it? It's the floor, you know," returned Isabel naïvely; "there is not another like it in all Washington."

The Hon. Cecil adjusted his monocle and gravely considered the waxed floor.

"If I should find you a chair in some quiet corner," he suggested at last, "would you take pity on my ignorance and point out a few people one ought to know?"

"If the chair proves comfortable," said Isabel, laughing, "I shall probably be very obliging. Ah, this is nice."

And it was undeniably cosey in the recess behind a tall palm, where a small divan loaded with pillows offered an inviting surface for the weary to rest upon, while a mantel banked with ferns and red roses presented an effective background for a slender form in a white frock. Also, one could command a fine view of the ballroom with its glittering panorama of handsomely gowned women and black-coated men, which the British Attaché scrutinized with a good deal of interest.

"Well," inquired Miss Byrd suddenly, "what do you think of us?"

"Collectively or individually?" returned the Hon. Cecil, quite unmoved by the abruptness of the query.

"Both."

"Individually you interest me very much; collectively I have not had time to form an opinion. I only arrived at the Legation yesterday, and my Chief brought me here to-night."

"We will probably be very nice to you," returned Isabel. "We're awfully polite to diplomats as a rule."

"Now," she continued, leaning back comfortably, "ask me some questions. I am all prepared to be instructive."

"First," he said, after a comprehensive view of the room, "who is the impressive old lady in black looking this way with such interest?"

"That is my aunt, Mrs. Chesley," said Isabel, laughing, "and she is talking to my father, Senator Byrd; I will present you to them both after awhile. I have no other relatives here, so you can be as unguarded as you please."

They both laughed a little, and Isabel continued, a scarcely perceptible motion of her fan indicating the person of whom she spoke.

"Miss Stone, the Chicago heiress; she is naturally in great demand, so you must lose no time in meeting her."

"Of course, I shall be charmed," he returned politely, "but there is no need for undue haste, is there?"

"The Minister from the Netherlands. I don't know why he always seems surrounded by a halo of romance," said Isabel, interrupting herself, "he is certainly most commonplace, but I always think of him as very interesting. I suppose it is the name—the Netherlands sounds so fascinating, somehow.

"'A rose by any other name,'" he quoted, smiling.

"The Russian Ambassador and Count Valdmir, one of the new Attachés," resumed Isabel. "I see you know them already."

"Count Valdmir and myself were stationed at our respective Embassies in Berlin at the same time; we also both happened to be on duty in Paris later on."

"It must be delightful to have lived in such a number of places and to meet so many interesting people,"

said Isabel enthusiastically, "and then to know all sorts of state secrets and be mixed up in international controversies must be positively thrilling."

"It has both advantages and disadvantages, Miss Byrd."

"That is Mrs. Redmond talking to the Russian Attaché. Is she not lovely?" exclaimed Isabel, after indicating several other personages of note.

Mr. Lyndhurst adjusted his eyeglass critically. He had been obliged to pass on with a hasty glance when presented, owing to pressure in the rear, and felt a natural curiosity as to the appearance of his hostess, who now turned, as though in response to his desire, and walked towards them, her hand upon the arm of Count Valdmir and her jewels gleaming under the electric lights. Miss Byrd rose and closed her fan.

"Will you take me to my aunt?" she asked. "We have been here quite too long, I fear."

But her companion did not reply. He was watching the white train of Mrs. Redmond's gown disappear into the conservatory opposite, and on his face was the incredulous expression of one suddenly confronted by the impossible.

The dim light of the conservatory and the cool green of many palms offered a restful vista for eyes wearied with the glitter of the ballroom, and the splash and ripple of a small fountain replaced the music of the band most acceptably. The Russian Attaché indicated a divan, comfortable with many pillows.

"Madame is tired," he remarked. "It is weary work, receiving people, especially with the American custom of shaking hands. Another cushion at your back—so."

Mrs. Redmond leaned against the cushion and contemplated the point of her slipper; her eyes followed the pattern of seed pearls embroidered upon it, and she afterwards remembered there were twenty-six small beads in each flower and one large one. The conservatory was empty, except for themselves, but through the curtained door came the hum of conversation mingled with strains of music, and shadows of passing figures fell dark upon the white marble floor; the air was heavy with the scent of blooming plants and oppressive in its moist heat.

Mrs. Redmond smoothed her long white glove until not a wrinkle remained.

"Well?" she said interrogatively.

Her companion broke a leaf off the plant nearest him and slowly tore it into bits.

"I received the roll of music, Madame," he said at last, "many thanks for your trouble. It was not, however, quite complete."

"Indeed?"

"The translation was lacking, consequently the song itself is to me pointless. In fact, Madame, it resembles a lock without a key."

"You are apt in your similes, Count."

He stooped to pick up a cushion which had slipped to the floor and replaced it carefully on the divan.

"Might I venture to trespass further on your kindness, Madame?" he said quietly. "I should much appreciate the translation. I am interested in the folklore of all countries, but their dialects are puzzling. Will you come to my assistance?"

The last notes of a waltz died away with the lingering sweetness peculiar to some melodies, and the conserva-

tory was suddenly alive with the voices and laughter of dancers who eagerly sought the cushioned seats judiciously placed in the dimly lighted seclusion of remote corners or conveniently large palms.

The Secretary, laboriously escorting a stout matron towards the supper-room, passed so close to his wife and her companion that she might have touched him by putting out her hand.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Layton," he was saying in evident reply to her interrogation, "I don't carry my diplomatic burden with me always. Even a peddler is free from his pack sometimes, you know."

"But such heavy responsibilities," murmured Mrs. Layton vaguely.

"I try to leave them at the Department," he returned pleasantly. "When I close my front door behind me I like to shut out all perplexities and vexations. One's home should be one's oasis in the desert of work-a-day life. Don't you think so?"

Mrs. Layton made an indefinite reply, and their voices were lost in the general hum of conversation.

The Russian Attaché leaned forward that he might better see his companion's face, which was somewhat in the shadow.

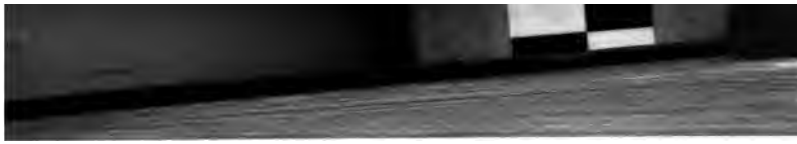
"You will oblige me, will you not?" he said softly.

A moment's silence ensued, during which the musical splash of the fountain was distinctly audible.

"I fear I must ask you to excuse me, Count," she said at last slowly, "I have no time to make the translation you desire."

He shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"You have many guests to-night, Madame," he remarked carelessly, as though dismissing the previous



topic. "I recognized a face just now I had not seen in years. The world is small, is it not?"

"Too small," assented Mrs. Redmond briefly, again absorbed in her slipper.

"It was the new British Attaché," he resumed reflectively. "Perhaps, Madame, you also remember him."

"I do not think so," she replied, opening her fan, "but I did not hear his name distinctly. What is it?"

"I knew him," said Count Valdmir, "in Berlin."

The fan paused in its slow motion and the lace bordering the bosom of her gown moved suddenly.

"Yes?" she said in a carefully modulated voice.

"His name, Madame, is Lyndhurst."

The fan slipped from Mrs. Redmond's fingers and fell upon the marble floor of the conservatory. He stooped and returned it with a slight bow.

"The stick is broken, Madame. Ivory and marble were never meant to clash. It is a pity."

Mrs. Redmond rose and closed her broken fan.

"We will return to the ballroom," she said quietly. "I am neglecting my guests."

"And I," he responded, also rising regretfully, "was engaged for the waltz just past; also for the one now in progress. I am not often so remiss as to forget my engagements, but in your society, Madame, one should not be held responsible for a lapse of memory. Shall we go?"

As he stepped back to allow his companion to pass Count Valdmir unceremoniously bumped into a short, stout man, who, followed by Senator Byrd, had just entered the conservatory.

"My dear sir," he exclaimed apologetically, "a thousand pardons!"

"My dear sir," returned the stout gentleman promptly, "I will gladly grant you *ten* thousand."

"Always go a Dago one better, Byrd," he remarked as they passed on, "you'll find it a good rule. When I meet 'em I'm overflowing with civility, just as they are, and I treat 'em all alike, just as I call 'em all Dagos regardless of nationality."

"You don't appreciate your social privileges," returned Senator Byrd, laughing; "many of them are first-rate fellows. And you must admit they are popular."

"Damned popular!" agreed his companion emphatically. "Just look at the women. Always ready to jump if they whistle. Even Mrs. Redmond continually has that Russian fox at her elbow, and I saw your pretty little red-haired girl sitting in a corner with the latest John Bull, utterly oblivious to the rest of the world. I tell you, I don't like 'em. Americans are good enough for me."

The Hon. Joshua Grimes was a specimen of that type of United States politician so invaluable to cartoonists. Fat, bald-headed, irascible, and quick-witted, he had long ago made himself solid with his party, and for many years represented a country district to the mutual satisfaction of himself and his constituents, finding time meanwhile to keep an eye to his own interests and the accumulation of the almighty dollar, without which, he was wont to remark, a man could do nothing in this country or any other.

"I don't suppose," remarked Senator Byrd as the Member of Congress paused for breath, "I don't suppose you asked me to come in here simply to abuse the Diplomatic Corps."

"Well, no, I didn't. Fact is, Byrd, I wanted to show you something I picked up just outside the ballroom door."

Senator Byrd responded to the greeting of a passing acquaintance and turned again to his companion.

"Well?" he said interrogatively.

Mr. Grimes produced two scraps of paper, creased and dirty, as though crumpled into a ball and thrown away, and smoothed them out carefully. They were so covered with pencil-marks and erasures as to be almost illegible. He handed them to Senator Byrd without comment.

"Well," said the Senator after a moment's scrutiny, "this seems to be a rough draft of something, I should say, but I doubt if I can make it out."

"I can," returned the other impassively; "thought I couldn't at first, then found I *could*—just like most things in life. Now listen."

The two men drew closer together as the Member of Congress lowered his voice.

"This," he said, indicating the top paper, "is so erased and scratched up I cannot make anything out of it, but here, at the bottom of the second page, is a perfectly intelligible sentence. 'Will meet you Thursday night and bring Roostchook papers.'

"And that is what I wanted to show you," he added dryly; "just at this time it is both interesting and puzzling."

Senator Byrd made no reply. He was examining the pieces of paper, which were fastened together in the upper left-hand corner by a bit of red, white, and blue cord. The Senator touched it and looked up inquiringly.

"Yes," said the stout Member of Congress quietly,

" it is the State Department symbol. Now the question is——"

"Ah," returned the Senator slowly, " that *is* the question."

He moved forward as he spoke and joined the Secretary, who had been wandering about the handsome rooms chatting with first one and then another in the genial, pleasant manner which made him universally popular. Mr. Grimes, meanwhile, twisted the tri-colored cord about his finger and admired the effect.

The Secretary stood in the doorway watching the panorama of the ballroom and enjoying the gorgeous spectacle; the droop of his shoulders was pronounced to-night and the lines about his eyes very apparent to the Senator as he studied him for a moment before speaking.

" That is your private secretary dancing with Isabel, is it not?" said Senator Byrd suddenly.

" I introduced him," replied the Secretary simply. " I wanted him to enjoy himself."

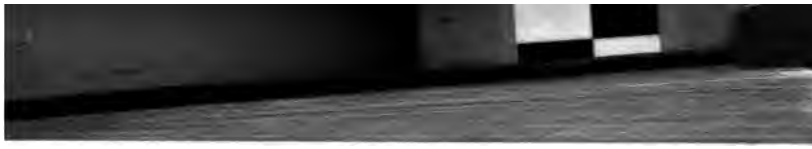
" Yes, no doubt," returned the Senator, laughing. " Well, they don't either of them seem bored.

" I hope," he added with sudden seriousness, as the two young people were lost in the crowd, " that your judgment of Mr. Leigh is correct. Appearances are much against him. I hope you have made no mistake."

" Perhaps I have," said the Secretary quietly; " time alone will tell."

"Ah!" exclaimed Senator Byrd, " here is Mrs. Redmond dancing with du Pré."

Involuntarily the Secretary held himself more erect, and the eyes which followed his wife's graceful form were no longer strained and weary, but met her smiling



glance with one equally cheerful as he waved his hand with a slight gesture of greeting. Mr. and Mrs. Redmond always exchanged a glance and smile even after a short separation.

Monsieur du Pré was proficient in the art of waltzing and guided his partner skilfully down the long room. He was conscious that he was the cynosure of all beholders and much enjoyed his position, for Mrs. Redmoned danced with a grace which made her movements the poetry of motion. The fiery crescent shone brilliantly against her dark hair, while the glowing jewels about her waist added a touch of living color indescribably effective.

No wonder the Secretary's eyes followed his wife as long as she was visible.

And no wonder the Hon. Cecil Lyndhurst, lounging in an opposite doorway, stared in a manner not wholly consistent with good breeding.

That gentleman, however, slowly retired to a smoking-room, where he mixed himself a rather stiff brandy and soda.

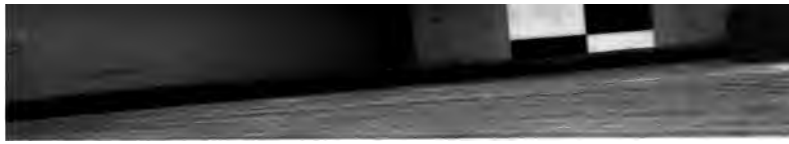
"The Khedive's opals," he ejaculated as he pressed the siphon. "By Jove! The Khedive's opals."

VI

MRS. REDMOND stood in the deserted ballrooms and waited for her husband. The sense of emptiness which follows in the wake of departed festivity pervaded the house; withered roses drooped dejectedly, now and then letting fall petals brown and shrunken at the edges; while the footsteps of the servants sounded strange and unreal as they moved about in the distance, extinguishing lights and closing windows.

The ball had been an unquestionable success, but the hostess was tired, as her pale cheeks and the violet shadows beneath her eyes testified indisputably. She had neglected no one; even the most impossible girls had been provided for, and consequently gone home complacently reflecting that their charms had at last begun to be appreciated. Therefore she should have retired to well-earned repose with a comfortable sense of duty well performed.

On the contrary, however, Mrs. Redmond's eyes were widely opened, gazing abstractedly into space, and her breath came in little gasps through her parted lips. She had removed her gloves and occasionally raised her hand to her throat, as though the weight of her necklace oppressed her. A scarcely perceptible sound caused her to turn towards the empty drawing-room and start impulsively in that direction. Pausing suddenly, after



taking a few steps, she stood irresolute, as though undecided whether to retreat or advance.

Again from the next room came a muffled noise, as of a heavy piece of furniture carefully moved. Mrs. Redmond leaned forward, listening intently, then walked quietly towards the communicating door, lifting her skirts carefully that they might not rustle.

The large drawing-room was dimly lighted now, and at a casual glance appeared quite empty. Closer inspection, however, revealed a figure at the farther end—a man moving slowly, his head bent forward as though to better examine every inch of floor surface he traversed. Occasionally he paused to shake out the folds of a curtain or lift a cushion from a chair, and once or twice dropped hastily upon one knee and carefully sifted a little heap of faded rose-leaves or raised the corner of a rug and looked beneath it, then resumed his journey round the room.

And Mrs. Redmond followed, step by step, down the long parlor and through the little reception-room into the hall beyond, pausing when he paused and noiselessly advancing when he resumed his line of march.

Across the hall they went, still unobserved, into the library and straight to the large mahogany desk used by the Secretary when at home. Now it is difficult to distinguish objects when the light is dim, and it was therefore necessary to stoop closely over the various letters and papers in order to decipher them, and even to turn on the electric light, which stood upon the desk, thus producing an unexpectedly bright illumination. In an instant the searcher had adjusted the shade, but not before his profile had been distinctly vignetted against the dark, wainscoted wall, plainly visible to the

woman behind him, who, with a stifled gasp of surprised recognition, drew hastily back, folding the dark portière about her white gown and standing motionless in the doorway, keenly observant of every detail.

Evidently the quest was unsuccessful, for he extinguished the light and left the room, passing so close to Mrs. Redmond that his shoulder stirred the sheltering portière and almost touched her arm. And she stood erect and motionless, making no sound nor effort to detain him, while the color gradually returned to her cheeks and her eyes shone with repressed excitement.

The latch of the front door clicked softly, and a breath of cool air stirred the heavy atmosphere of the deserted hall.

"James," said the Secretary's voice from the stairs, "you may put out the lights and go to bed; the house can be set to rights in the morning."

The tensity of Mrs. Redmond's attitude relaxed suddenly as with an exclamation of relief she released the portière and started into the hall to meet her husband.

"Poor dear," she said sympathetically, extending both hands in greeting, "how tired you look. Come into the dining-room and forage; I know you haven't eaten a morsel, and neither have I, and I'm starving—positively starving."

The Secretary laughed and allowed himself to be gently pulled in the direction of the dining-room, where the lights still burned and glass and silver glittered invitingly.

"Sit down," said Mrs. Redmond, relinquishing his hands and pulling up a chair, "and I'll get you something. Oh, yes, John, *let* me, I love so to do it, and you know it will taste better than if a waiter brings it.

See, here is salad and wine, and some of those nice, crispy little rolls."

"Wait," she continued, setting the plate before him, "don't be greedy, John—wait till I'm ready too."

She drew another chair close to her husband and tasted the salad critically.

"The best part of the ball," she remarked conclusively, "is when we eat whatever we can find all by ourselves and talk it over. I've been looking forward to this for hours—and so have you. Now, don't try to deny it, I know you have."

"You are irresistible to-night, Estelle," returned the Secretary fondly. "Your opals are on fire, child, and so are your eyes."

The jewel at her throat glowed triumphantly, as though in acknowledgment of this involuntary tribute to its beauty, but a sudden mistiness clouded the blue eyes, which darkened and softened as the Secretary leaned forward, taking her face between his hands, and gazed earnestly into them.

"I am very proud of my wife," he said gently.

And the opal changed from red to blue, fading cold and colorless in the shadow of his hands.

"By the way," he continued, resuming his fork after a moment's silence, "I thought I heard the front door close just now. Did you notice who came in?"

Mrs. Redmond crumbled a bit of bread and swept the fragments into a little heap on the damask cloth.

"It was Mr. Leigh," she replied quietly, "but he didn't come in, John, he went out."

VII

THE moon is a long way from the earth, yet it sometimes looks near at hand and almost within reach. Occasionally, also, one falls a victim to its glamour, and when under the spell of its enchantment forgets there is such a thing as distance.

Then, gradually, the soft light vanishes; the earth is no longer a Place Beautiful, but degenerates into a treadmill where one must keep moving or fall by the wayside; and the moon itself is discovered to be merely a luminous body, with no power of enchantment whatever; in short, the spell is broken and the distance very apparent.

As David Leigh awoke the morning after Mrs. Redmond's ball he was conscious of a vague sensation of guiding a slender, white-gowned figure through a crowded room to the dreamy rhythm of a well-played waltz. This agreeable vision was gradually replaced by the unpleasant reality that the furnace made not the slightest impression on Mrs. Colson's north room, and that breakfast was in progress below; an odor of beefsteak wafted to his unwilling nostrils aided him in reaching the latter conclusion, and he also believed the steak to be accompanied by fried potatoes.

Plainly it was time for the Secretary's secretary to be up and doing, for another day had announced itself and the doors of the State Department would shortly be un-

locked, ready for the usual routine. The click of the typewriter would sound instead of the voice of the violin; office furniture and accessories would replace the flower-decked ballroom; and politicians with silk hats and immaculate waistcoats would claim his attention instead of Isabel Byrd in her dainty gown. Isabel, who because of her gray eyes with their long, black lashes, and for other inscrutable reasons, suddenly became the One Girl in his small world as he inscribed his name on her programme and waited with ill-concealed impatience for his dance. Isabel—last night a delightful vision, but a girl, and therefore to be won; this morning very much the daughter of Senator Byrd and quite out of the question.

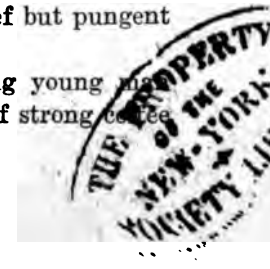
At first his recollections of the previous night were vaguely centred about the one face and figure, but as he opened his eyes and mechanically sat upright Leigh was overwhelmed by a sudden rush of memory. Certain facts flashed across his mind with startling distinctness, and he sank down among the pillows, turning his back upon the gray light of the winter morning from which he would fain retire.

"Past eight, Mr. Leigh."

This announcement was accompanied by a knock on the door, repeated after a silent interval in a slightly more imperative manner.

"And anybody'd think, to hear the grumpiness of him, that it was meself *askin'* a favor, instid o' *doin'* one," muttered Norah with an indignant toss of her head as she retreated after eliciting a brief but pungent response from within.

It was a rather pale, depressed-looking young man who "troubled" Mrs. Colson for a cup of strong coffee



some fifteen minutes later and swallowed it hastily, with no apparent realization of the fact that it was near the boiling-point.

"What do you think his throat is made of?" inquired Mrs. Colson generally, as David left the table after a hurried pretext at breakfast.

"The same material as your own, I suppose," returned Miss Jackson tartly, fingering and refusing several pieces of bread preparatory to putting up her lunch. Miss Jackson's manners, like her shoes, were somewhat down at the heel in the morning; the prospect of the long hours which must be passed in the seclusion of the Treasury Department lent an acidity to her whole aspect, and she buttered her bread disdainfully, as though repudiating any personal connection therewith.

"Don't you think," remarked Mrs. Colson *sotto voce* as Miss Jackson in turn sought the front door, "that dear Miss Jackson looks very old and peaked this winter?"

And there was a general murmur of assent from Miss Jackson's friends and associates.

At the State Department much was waiting for willing or unwilling hands to do. The Secretary was late in arriving, and the daily mountain of mail accumulated on his desk awaiting his signature. Leigh turned it over meditatively. Here were routine matters prepared by various branches of the Department and apparently of no particular interest to the private secretary, for he passed them by with a casual glance; here too was the incoming mail, and he looked through it also, sifting it rapidly and laying certain papers aside for the personal attention of the Secretary; taking various others

to his own desk in the small adjoining room he began to dispose of them mechanically, but suddenly he paused, and resting his arms on the desk bowed his head upon them.

"There must be some way out of it," he ejaculated aloud, "some other way."

It was Diplomatic Day, and the representatives of various countries began to assemble in the room set apart for their use before the Secretary arrived. He came in hastily, accompanied by Senator Byrd.

"You say the President demands an explanation?" observed the latter as they entered.

"He demands the papers themselves," replied Mr. Redmond in a troubled voice; "he says their disappearance is incredible. I almost think he believes——"

"No," interrupted the Senator hastily, "impossible——"

"His manner was extremely frigid," continued the Secretary, unlocking a drawer in his desk; "he declined to discuss the Roostchook matter, but gave me this synopsis of the policy he desired to pursue, remarking that it was difficult to handle a case of this sort from memory alone, and he trusted I would make an effort to produce the other papers and draw up a memorandum for him containing a few facts, as he disliked dealing in generalities and wanted to issue his ultimatum."

"And his policy?"

The Secretary's fingers tapped nervously against a long envelope he drew from his pocket, and he sank wearily into the brown leather chair beside his desk before replying.

"It means," he said slowly, "if he persists (and I

think he will), war with Russia and eventually with England. It means needless sacrifice of life and unnecessary expenditure of money; fatherless children; tears, and the bitterness of desolation to many women; and perhaps a little glory for a favored few. That is what the President's policy means to the country."

Leigh turned uneasily in his swivel-chair. He was in plain sight from the adjoining room, but his presence was overlooked or ignored by both men, and the Secretary began to speak again in short, jerky sentences, as though simply voicing his thoughts.

"If we had been given time—time to negotiate further. If we conceded certain points, even while insisting upon our rights. I meant to mediate—to be conciliatory. I meant to keep the peace."

"The country is unprepared," said Senator Byrd gravely; "war means defeat and humiliation, not victory and triumph. Can you not use your influence?"

"My influence," said the Secretary quietly, "vanished with the Roostchook papers. The President was not himself to-day; his manner was extraordinary, to say the least. I don't like it, Byrd; I don't like it."

"Well," said Senator Byrd, taking up his hat, "we must do what we can to avert trouble. At least we will go slowly. The Senate will not favor anything precipitate, but I am not so sure about the House. However, I will see Rivers and Grimes, and we will keep it quiet for a few weeks longer if possible. Meanwhile, the other papers may turn up."

"The plan of defence of New York Harbor is missing," said the Secretary slowly. "Do you realize what that means just now? And we have no idea—— What is it, Mr. Leigh?"

For the private secretary had approached his chief with a hesitating reminder of the waiting diplomats.

"Yes, certainly," responded the Secretary, putting the envelope he held into the open drawer and turning the key, "I should have remembered, and I have not even looked at my morning's mail."

He sighed impatiently, then rose and squared his shoulders resolutely.

"I will receive the Ambassador from Great Britain," he announced as he passed into the long, ebony-trimmed reception-room.

An hour later Leigh was conscious of a subdued rustle in the Secretary's office, accompanied by a subtle perfume, and, turning hastily, beheld as much of Miss Isabel Byrd as the large sable muff she carried would permit.

"Dear me," remarked that young person as he came quickly forward, "what a very serious sort of a place. I really feel as though I were in church and should whisper. And you look grave and important enough, Mr. Leigh, to officiate as the lay reader. Is it possible that you actually danced with me last night?"

"Wasn't it a jolly ball?" said Leigh eagerly, boyish and attractive in an instant. "I hope, Miss Byrd, you are not tired out this morning. You look as fit as possible."

Isabel laughed and remarked that she had come down to meet her father, but believed he had forgotten his appointment.

"Why," said David, smiling, "the Senator has been here and gone up to the Capitol. I fear he *did* forget, Miss Byrd."

"In that case," she replied, taking up her muff, "I

won't wait any longer. Perhaps, Mr. Leigh, you can tell me how to find the State Department Library. I wanted to look up something there, and father was going to help me. It's awfully tiresome in him to forget. I haven't a bit of sense about doing such things for myself."

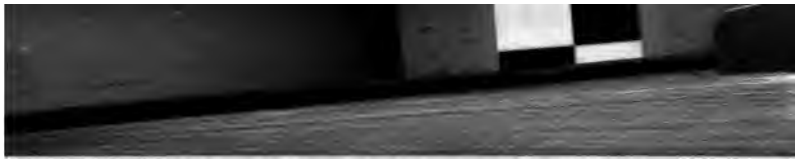
"If I could be of any assistance," began David eagerly, "I should be only too glad. Oh, no, Miss Byrd," as she made a faint protest, "I have plenty of time—there is no reason I should not help you."

The deceitful moon again seemed almost within reach as the swing door closed behind them and he touched the button for the elevator which would lift him far above such mundane trifles as official correspondence and a threatened international crisis.

Behind the brass screen in the now empty room the wood-fire snapped and crackled cheerfully. The sunlight shone through the large south windows, gilding even the sober bindings of the corpulent volumes of law and jurisprudence in the revolving bookcase and touching gently the Secretary's pens, placed in an orderly row on their rack, his brown leather chair, and the bronze paper-weight on the blotter. But the full force of the sun was concentrated upon the handle of the key the Secretary had left in the upper right-hand drawer of his desk, which shone and twinkled irresistibly, audaciously drawing attention to itself and seeming to proclaim to whom it might concern,—

"Here I am, ready and waiting, come and turn me."

To the Secretary, seated at the head of the long, ebony-trimmed table, the morning was interminable. He had received the Ambassador from Great Britain, and had managed so well that the latter had retired



pleased with himself and the world in general. The Chinese Minister too had paid his respects and delivered a message from his sovereign containing protestations of friendship and endless fidelity, and the Secretary had replied in kind. Lesser lights in the diplomatic world called and delivered their credentials or brought documents from their respective Governments. The Ambassador from Russia had also called.

It seemed to the Secretary as he pondered anxiously over the last-mentioned interview that it was not entirely satisfactory; there had been an assertive manner about his visitor as unwelcome as it was unexpected, and the request he preferred seemed to assume the nature of a demand when calmly considered afterwards. So the lines on the Secretary's forehead deepened as he sat abstractedly in the long, handsome room and the minutes passed unnoticed.

Suddenly he became aware of a quick rustle of skirts, and two soft hands were clasped over his eyes.

"Guess," said a voice close to his ear, "guess which country I represent."

"Why, Estelle," he exclaimed in accents which would have surprised the Russian Minister, "what brings you here? And how very pretty you look, my dear."

"Do I?" said Mrs. Redmond, immediately consulting the mirror. "I'm so glad. I like to look my very best when I come to see you."

"But suppose someone else had come in?"

"They are all gone, John—long ago. I waited ages all alone out in your office, and you were in such a brown study you never heard me open the door behind you. Every now and then I looked in. Now I want something—can you guess what?"

"Money," hazarded the Secretary, in the light of past experience.

"No," said Mrs. Redmond, laughing, "not this time. Try again."

"I am not good at guessing."

"Nor at remembering. Don't you know this is our anniversary?"

"We were married in April," said the Secretary, smiling. "I remember it very well. The sixteenth. This is December."

"Have you forgotten that December day in Paris when we dined in the Latin Quarter?"

"No," said the Secretary, drawing her nearer to him, "no, Estelle, certainly not."

"The butter without salt," she continued breathlessly, "the dear old dingy room, and the white wine——"

"Tasting like vinegar," he supplemented. "I remember."

"It tasted like nectar to me," she said dreamily, "and afterwards—oh, John, you *do* remember?"

"Of course," he said quickly. "Why, Estelle, how could I forget?"

"You have never regretted it, John? I was poor and obscure and lonely. Sometimes I think you asked me out of pity."

"Estelle," said the Secretary, looking earnestly into her eyes, "listen to me. My only pleasure in life, my only happiness, is centred in you; without you I should not care to live. The wonder is, child, that you should love so old a man."

"Well, I do," said Mrs. Redmond between tears and laughter, "and, dear me, how serious we have grown!

What I came for was to take you out with me. I know a little French *pension*, and we can lunch there all by ourselves. I mean to order *just* what we had that day; I remember it all—even the salad."

"And so do I," said the Secretary, laughing and opening the door. "I am charmed to lunch with you, Mrs. Redmond, although I don't recall the viands with a marked degree of pleasure."

"And afterwards," said Mrs. Redmond softly, "we will go home together; you must not come back here to-day—it is *mine*. We'll be comfy and happy. You shall sit and smoke on one side of the fire and I'll sit there too, on the same side, and we'll talk about Paris, and Venice, and the old days. Come, John."

They passed into the private office just as the outer door opened to admit David Leigh, and Mrs. Redmond paused to greet him while her husband put on his overcoat.

"Mr. Leigh," said the Secretary, after a cursory glance at his desk, "I am going out and I shall not return this afternoon. The Assistant Secretary will sign."

A sudden flash of light from the shining key caught his eye, and he removed it from the drawer and placed it on his key-ring, while Mrs. Redmond moved towards the door and beckoned impatiently.

"You will please look over my mail, Mr. Leigh," continued the Secretary as he joined his wife, "and I don't think there is anything else to keep you here this afternoon. No doubt you can find good use for the time elsewhere."

He nodded kindly as he closed the door, but his private secretary stood stupidly in the centre of the

room gazing at the desk with its pile of papers and empty chair. Something white lay on the floor at his feet and he stooped to pick it up. It proved to be a dainty handkerchief, perfumed and embroidered. Leigh folded it carefully as he crossed the room and looked out of the window over the broad expanse of The Mall with eyes which saw nothing of the wintry landscape.

"I was gone for two hours," he remarked to an inquisitive sparrow which sought shelter from the wind on the stone window-sill, "two whole hours."

VIII

Mr. Marks, scientist and man of erudition, sought David Leigh in his apartment at Mrs. Colson's one evening as the latter was putting the finishing-touches to his toilet preparatory to dining with a party of young men at the Alibi Club.

"I trust," said he with laborious politeness, "that I do not incommode you by my unceremonious appearance."

"Not a bit of it," replied David cheerfully. "Can't you find a chair? Oh, just shove those things off on the floor and sit down anywhere. I'm rather in a mess just now, as you see."

David devoted his entire attention to his necktie, and when he considered it beyond criticism looked inquiringly at his visitor.

"Mr. Leigh," said that gentleman with the air of a man who makes an astonishing announcement, "I propose to spend a portion of this evening calling upon a young lady."

"Do you?" said David cordially. "Now, I call that uncommonly wise on your part. But why only a portion?"

"My paper, intended for the *Scientific American*, showing the development of the monkey into the man is yet unfinished," returned Mr. Marks stiffly, "hence but a few hours each evening can be devoted to frivolity."

"Too bad!" said David sympathetically. "Now, I am afraid I should be inclined to chuck the monkey business and make it the whole evening—of course, however, that depends on the girl."

"You seem conversant with the ordinary phases of social life," resumed Mr. Marks rather patronizingly, "while I have had but little leisure to study them, being occupied with more important and serious pursuits. In calling upon a young lady what, for instance, is your idea of a seemly topic of conversation?"

Mr. Marks was a deep and unfailing source of pleasure to David, who delighted in drawing him out, always sure of being rewarded for this trouble.

"The young lady herself," he now returned promptly, carefully adjusting his cuff-button.

Mr. Marks made a note of this reply on the back of his visiting-card.

"I thought," he explained, "that I would just jot down a few topics and hold the card in my hand—so. Then when one subject was exhausted I could glance carelessly down and introduce another."

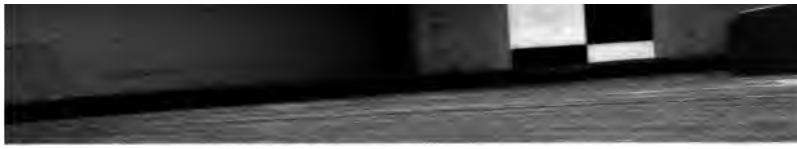
"A most excellent idea," said David gravely, "and original too. What had you thought of jotting?"

"Well," said Mr. Marks, "I begin with Professor Bristow's paper upon metallurgy. Most interesting."

"No doubt," agreed David suavely. "What else?"

"I thought I might touch lightly upon Professor Green's description of a partial eclipse of the sun in Liberia; there were unusual and most unexpected features connected with it."

"I would make the touch very light indeed, Mr. Marks," suggested David. "Why not mention the weather, or the theatre, or perhaps the last new book?"



"The latest book of note," observed Mr. Marks, making an entry on his card. "I suppose that would embrace either Hendrick's treatise expounding his theory on the extinction of the mastodon, or von Weber's 'Electricity; Past, Present, and Future'—a masterpiece, Mr. Leigh, a masterpiece."

David turned and regarded him curiously.

"Mr. Marks," he said anxiously, "search your memory. Did you never *frivol*?"

"I do not think," said Mr. Marks reflectively, "that I recall the exact definition of the word."

David broke into delighted and irrepressible laughter.

"Brace up, man, brace up!" he exclaimed, slapping the surprised scientist on the shoulder. "Read a few novels, the more sentimental the better; go to the theatre; never mind whether we descended from monkeys or not; for my part, I don't care to know the exact truth."

Mr. Marks shuffled his feet uneasily; he wore green carpet slippers with a pink rose over the toes thereof, and his white stockings wrinkled loosely around the ankle.

"One should keep in touch with the questions of the day," he observed pompously.

"Now look here," said David as he brushed his hat, "go out and see girls every evening for a while, but for Heaven's sake don't talk to them about mastodons and metallurgy. If you can't think of anything to say, just sit still and look pleasant and let them do the talking. You might send the one you like best a few flowers, you know, or something of that sort."

"I had thought of that," confessed Mr. Marks, "but I feared I might compromise myself unduly by such a

very marked attention. I wish to arouse no false hopes, Mr. Leigh."

David assured him he might safely invest in the flowers, then paused and looked with interest at his companion.

"Mr. Marks," he remarked seriously, "what you need is to see life. There's lots of it all around you; Washington is just full of real, vital, pulsating life. Go out and find it. Take my advice, drop your ologies and isms for a while and *live*. You'll find it pays in the long run."

"Perhaps it does," acquiesced Mr. Marks thoughtfully, "perhaps it does."

He rose and started for the door, but lingered uncertainly.

"I am going to see Miss Gray," he announced abruptly. "Have you any message?"

"My regards, of course," replied David carelessly. "I'm really ashamed when I think I have never called upon her since she left here."

Mr. Marks slowly retreated to his hall bedroom and made his toilet with unwonted care. A pot of white hyacinths in full bloom loaded the room with their overpowering fragrance. It would seem that he made his purchases first and asked advice afterwards.

Mr. Marks proceeded to comb his stiff, light-brown hair directly upward above his massive brow and assume a clean collar; also a large cravat which hooked behind, thus presenting a hard, black surface in front, not unlike a funereal pincushion, and brushed his coat carefully. It was of good quality broadcloth, therefore the fact that it wrinkled in the back and was several inches too short in the sleeves disturbed his serenity not at all;

nor did the manner in which his trousers crept far above his shoetops whenever he sat down seem in the least important, for the higher stratas of Mr. Marks's brain had been carefully cultivated to the entire exclusion of all mundane trifles. He then took from the window the pot of hyacinths, wrapped it carefully in newspaper, and prepared to go out.

It was very cold. The December wind penetrated to the marrow of his bones, while the paper about the hyacinths fluttered alarmingly as he resolutely forged his way across Lafayette Park, regardless of the fine, cold rain which fell steadily. Finally the wind, after pausing for an instant, rushed down Pennsylvania Avenue and through the park with renewed vigor, carrying with it Mr. Marks's box-shaped derby as well as the paper about the flowers.

The hat rolled rapidly down the path with Mr. Marks in hot pursuit, and finally brought up abruptly against the iron railing surrounding the statue of Jackson on his rampant steed. Breathless, but triumphant, the man of science clutched his property. He also clutched something else. A flat package carefully wrapped in thick brown paper had taken refuge against the railing, and he tucked it securely beneath his arm.

"Had quite a chase, didn't you?" remarked the park policeman sympathetically, readjusting the hyacinths, which were considerably the worse for the run.

"He might 'a' had a civil word for a body," muttered that functionary as Mr. Marks absently marched off without replying.

From the rear of General Jackson now appeared a second wet, wind-tossed figure, anxiously scanning the ground.

"I say," it remarked abruptly, "I've lost a package, you know. Didn't happen to see it, did you?"

"Was it flat and long and wrapped in brown paper?" inquired the policeman deliberately.

"Yes," said the figure hurriedly, "yes, that's it."

"T'other chap picked it up," said the arm of the law indifferently; "he went that a-way," pointing vaguely towards the Avenue and resuming his measured pacing to and fro as the other started in pursuit of the unconscious Mr. Marks.

Having made the circuit of the park, he again drew near the Jackson statue in the centre, where he encountered a woman wrapped in a long, dark cloak and vainly trying to breast the buffeting of the wind. She grasped the iron railing for support as she accosted him, and he observed that her hand was small and daintily gloved, although her face was completely hidden by a thick veil.

"I have been so unfortunate as to lose a long, flat package wrapped in brown paper," she said hastily; "perhaps you may have seen it."

The policeman was getting familiar with this formula.

"You aren't the only one that's lost such a bundle to-night," he returned curiously, and proceeded to give her all the information he possessed.

With a hasty word of thanks she sped away in the direction indicated, while he watched her fluttering draperies disappear in the distance.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he ejaculated fervently, "I certainly am blowed!"

Meanwhile Mr. Marks pursued the even tenor of his way, totally unconscious of having annexed another person's property.

Christine Gray had been forced to leave the genteel

shelter of Mrs. Colson's roof for a cheaper abiding-place, and had accordingly transferred herself and her belongings to a house within the limits of the sixty dollars a month which must provide food and lodging as well as raiment for an apparently indefinite period. Life in the War Department, with the recreation and bodily nourishment afforded by a second-class boarding-house, was not a particularly healthy existence for a young and pretty girl, but Christine as yet enjoyed the novelty of being closely occupied, and might be said to rival even the little busy bee of copy-book renown, inasmuch as she had so far managed to extract honey from weeds as well as flowers.

On this particular evening she had perched herself on the side of her bed, having installed her sister in the one comfortable chair the room contained, after forcibly depriving her of her hat and coat. Mary Gray had lately completed her course of training at a large hospital, and the rare evenings she could spend with her sister were highly prized. The younger girl also looked forward eagerly to these visits and had settled herself to recount even the most minute trifles which had occurred since their last meeting.

"Oh, dear," she exclaimed dismally as Mr. Marks's card was handed her, "to think he should come to-night. Well, I'll be just as stupid and quiet as I can, and perhaps he won't stay long."

Consequently it was a *distraite* and preoccupied damsel who listened to poor Mr. Marks's strenuous efforts to be lively and agreeable. In vain did he carelessly glance at the card of memoranda in his hand and laboriously introduce one subject after another. Christine was bored and showed it plainly, and Mr. Marks felt that as

a social trifler he was a distinct failure. Not yet vanquished, however, he gave a most unnecessary hitch to the legs of his trousers, which already permitted the display of fully three inches of stocking, and started in afresh.

"Professor Frisbane asserted the other day, during a brief conversation with me," he remarked learnedly, "that, in his opinion, direct communication with the planet Mars was a mere matter of time."

"Indeed?" returned Christine vaguely, and silence ensued.

"I have been deeply interested in a series of articles now appearing in the *Scientific American*," volunteered Mr. Marks with renewed animation, "which discuss the subject of ossification in all its bearings. I will be glad to lend them to you."

"No, please don't," replied Christine hurriedly,—"I mean, I have not any time for reading."

A few more topics of general interest were introduced by the gentleman and wet-blanketed by the lady, until at last, discouraged, he took his leave. When he paused in the hall to put on his overcoat he discovered the pot of hyacinths and the recently acquired package, both of which he had entirely forgotten. Mr. Marks was puzzled as to the proper course to pursue, but decided to act boldly. Retreating to the doorsteps, he rang a violent peal at the bell, and when the maid appeared thrust both plant and bundle into her astonished hands.

"For Miss Gray," he said abruptly, "with my compliments," and promptly disappeared.

"He stayed everlastingly, Molly," remarked Christine, returning to find her sister putting on her hat, "and now you're going. It's too bad."

"Christine," said Miss Gray as she buttoned her coat, "where did you get those roses?"

Christine dimpled and glowed as she touched the bowl of red roses caressingly.

"It was Mr. Rivers," she replied, "and oh, Molly, he has been so nice. I wanted to tell you all about it."

"The gentleman who has just left sends you these with his compliments, Miss," said the maid, appearing suddenly.

Christine impatiently pushed the flowers on one side, but curiously untied the stout twine string about the package. A second package was disclosed closely sealed and labelled.

"R-double o," spelled Christine slowly. "Oh, it's just those old papers he spoke of. As though I wanted to read them."

"What papers?"

"I'm sure I don't remember, Molly. Rossification or ossification or something of that sort."

"Christine," remarked her sister, slowly drawing on her gloves, "I believe Mr. Marks is a *good* man."

"Very worthy, indeed," returned Christine lightly. "No doubt he rocked his own cradle to save his mother trouble. But it don't follow that I have to read his old bundle of papers."

Mary kissed her sister and turned to depart, but paused a moment, her hand on the door-knob.

"Christine," she said earnestly, "I don't feel comfortable about Mr. Rivers. One hears such strange things in Washington. Please be careful, dear."

"Nonsense," replied Christine equably, "I'm quite able to look out for myself, Molly. And then, there's Harry."

"Yes," said Miss Gray as she closed the door, "to be sure, there's Harry—in Alaska."

Christine, left alone, hastened to put the blooming plant on the outer edge of the window-sill.

"I do abominate the odor of white hyacinths," she remarked as she lowered the shade.

She then proceeded to clip the stems of the roses and put them into fresh water, lingering over the task as though she liked it and humming a merry little tune. This done, she once more picked up the despised package and balanced it on her fingers.

"Shall I open it?" she deliberated.

The drawer of the bureau was partly open, displaying laces, handkerchiefs, gloves, and ribbons in hopeless confusion. With a contemptuous motion she tossed the package in also.

"So much for that," she exclaimed aloud. "If he wants them again, he can come for them. I don't expect to waste my time reading them."

Christine now seated herself before the mirror and carefully studied the face that was reflected therein. She noted the brown hair which lay in little, soft rings about the low, white forehead; the large brown eyes which smiled back at her through a fringe of long, curled lashes; the rounded cheek, tinted like a shell; the little, rosy ears and the dimpled mouth. And Christine lighted another gas-jet that she might have a better view.

After an exhaustive study of the mirror she rose and yawned sleepily.

"I ought to write to Harry," she remarked as she put her face into the bowl of roses and inhaled their perfume, "but I'm so sleepy I think I'll go to bed.

And I forgot to tell Molly about the theatre too, but I guess it's all right; anyhow, I'm going."

And in his hall bedroom at Mrs. Colson's Mr. Marks was also seated before his mirror. The treatise upon the evolution of the monkey into the man lay face downward upon the floor, and the ink had long since dried upon the pen thrust behind his ear.

"I believe," he said aloud, "that it is a man's duty to personally investigate all phases of life in order to thoroughly understand existence. I shall begin with the social."

Mr. Marks ran his fingers rapidly through his upright locks and caressed the shadowy little whiskers which adorned the turning-point of the jaw-bone.

"I don't see," he remarked reflectively, removing his black cravat, "but that I am as good looking as most men."

IX

Not far from the White House, almost in the shadow of the Department of State, stands an old brick house whose many-sided walls could, if they desired, tell strange stories of the past, and perhaps of the present also, for who knows what comedies and tragedies are transpiring every day at our very doorsteps?

It is the Octagon House, a bit of the history of Washington—a house of memories; a house of shadows. For many years it was untenanted and deserted save by a well-authenticated ghost—a most unsociable ghost, who preferred solitude to the best society and made night a thing of terror to curious adventurers. At the present time, however, the lower floors are used during the day by the Society of American Architects, and the chance visitor is shown over it by the janitor, who inhabits the top floor, if the latter happens to be at home and obligingly disposed. He displays the secret doors, now, alas! with latches and obtrusive hinges; the unexpected closets and mysterious hallways; the subterranean passage through which persons well known to history passed and repassed during the troubled days of 1812; persons unknown to history are also said to have had business which led them through this passage, and imagination runs rampant as one explores the short bit that escaped the renovation of Eighteenth Street. One gazes with a feeling of awe into the room where the treaty of peace

was signed, and with interest at the room where Dolly Madison slept during the days the British were in the Capitol City and the White House too dangerous for a woman. But the visitor is not yet satisfied.

"Was there not," he asks curiously, "some tragedy connected with the house, or with the old Virginian who built it?"

And then perhaps he hears the story of the Octoroon, whose uneasy spirit escapes at night from the wall where she was incarcerated and moves restlessly about the silent rooms looking for her murderer; or the slave locked in the attic, who starved rather than submit; or the bride who jumped from the top of the spiral staircase; or——

But the visitor has heard enough and departs, glad to get back into the noise and sunshine of everyday life. Perhaps, though, he pauses at the front door and looks back. Looks through the circular hall and out the window opposite into the neglected old walled garden, and imagines it again rose-scented, with trim, box-bordered paths and close-clipped turf. He sees the rooms ablaze with light, echoing to careless laughter and the tap of dancing feet; he sees the host with courtly manners and true Southern hospitality, but withal hot-tempered and revengeful; and also in the background he sees the Octoroon. And as he slowly walks up the street he wonders, be he never so matter of fact, what happens there at night when the doors and windows are closed; if—— But he shrugs his shoulders incredulously as he hails a passing car and straightway forgets all about it.

On a certain wet December evening, however, nothing supernatural would have been observed about the Octagon House had one plucked up courage to venture in. On the contrary, a no less thoroughly alive person than

Count Valdmir sat in the old dining-room and, with the assistance of his friend, Colonel St. John, carefully examined a map spread out before them upon a rough deal table, for the architects were not yet in possession and furniture was limited. Heat and light were apparently limited also, for they wore their overcoats and shivered now and then with the penetrating damp of the place, while two candles in tin candlesticks did their best to accentuate the surrounding darkness, for although it was but a little after six o'clock the shades of night had settled over the city some time since and now held undisturbed sway everywhere. The two men sat side by side that they might both look at the map; their faces were towards the hall, the door leading into which was carefully closed, and with only the blank wall behind them.

There was an alertness about Colonel St. John noticeably different from his former manner; his hair was brushed and he had again returned to his razor with consequent improvement in his personal appearance. His voice too had lost the thin, unpleasant whine, and altogether he gave the impression of a man who has again some interest in life; the trembling of his hands, however, and a shifty expression in his bloodshot eyes betrayed the habitual drunkard.

"Is this the best you can do?" inquired Count Valdmir abruptly as he scanned the map critically, while his companion watched him with keen anxiety.

"I had so little data on which to work," was the deprecating reply; "I did the best I could."

"But it is not reliable?"

"Perhaps not entirely."

"Explain again as concisely as possible."

The old man leaned forward, his shaking finger indicating on the map the points to which he referred.

"This," he said slowly, "is the mouth of the Potomac; I could not go below that, naturally."

Count Valdmir nodded impatiently, and he continued slowly:

"Here are the outer defences of Washington, Fort Hunt and Fort Washington; their garrisons are noted on the margin; these stars show the locations of their batteries. This information is tentative merely; I had no opportunity to verify it. These red squares indicate the beds of submarine mines, also tentative, but presumably accurate."

"Nothing absolute," interrupted Count Valdmir, "nothing reliable. Doubtful information, Colonel, is sometimes worse than none at all."

Colonel St. John's trembling finger followed the course of the river upon the map.

"Here," he continued, "is the Arsenal. I have a separate plan of it in my pocket drawn to scale, setting forth the strength and location of all the batteries in great detail. This information is not tentative; I drew the plan myself from personal observation and know it to be correct. There are improvements in process of erection there, and I had private access to the grounds."

He produced a sketch as he spoke and the two bent over it with interest.

"How did you get this information, Colonel?" inquired Count Valdmir suddenly.

Colonel St. John smiled. It was not a pleasant smile, and his bushy eyebrows were drawn together over his bleared blue eyes.

"I have an acquaintance employed in the War Department," he said slowly, "who was kind enough to show me around one day. He had access to the files; also he owes me much money."

Count Valdmir nodded comprehendingly.

"The result of an evening or so at Jackson City," he said suavely. "I understand. Proceed, Colonel, you interest me."

"He is willing to oblige me in various little ways," continued the old man quietly, "because if I pressed my claim and brought the matter before the authorities he would probably be discharged. It is thus a great Republic insures the integrity of its employés."

The rain dashed suddenly against the window and the shrunken frames rattled with the force of the wind. Count Valdmir turned up the sable collar of his coat and glanced about curiously.

"So this is the house," he said slowly.

His companion acquiesced silently.

"When I was a boy," he said at last, "many years ago, Count, I lived in Washington, in this immediate neighborhood. I know the house and its history well."

"It was an admirable selection, Colonel, and reflects credit on your judgment."

"When I applied for the position of caretaker," said Colonel St. John with a dry smile, "I had no difficulty in securing the billet; it was not in demand."

"What is that?" said Count Valdmir abruptly.

Both men sprang to their feet and listened breathlessly. Only the splashing of the rain and the trot of a passing horse broke the stillness.

"I could swear," exclaimed Count Valdmir, "that I heard the rustle of a woman's skirts."

"I heard nothing," returned his companion slowly—"nothing."

"You must have heard it. The sound of silk is unmistakable."

Colonel St. John shrugged his shoulders.

"You are not the first, Count, to hear strange noises in this house. I am not superstitious myself, but I do not sleep here. I prefer Jackson City."

The Russian resumed his chair and took up the sketch of the Arsenal, examining it minutely.

"For how long are you capable of keeping sober?" he inquired suddenly.

The old man shrank visibly, a cringing manner replacing the faint assumption of manliness, and the corners of his mouth working miserably.

"Not long," he faltered uncertainly, "not long. I'm an old man, Count, and not strong. I must have stimulant."

"This sketch," continued Count Valdmir, carefully rolling it as he spoke, "is excellent. I want more of them. Also I want other information. I shall get you appointed in the Department of State. But you must keep sober, do you understand?"

"For how long?"

"Until I have no further use for you, which I fear, Colonel, from the turn affairs have taken lately, will be some months. Once a week, or oftener if necessary, I will meet you here. Meantime, in the evenings you can continue your chicken raising at Jackson City; perhaps you have other friends employed in the War Department who would be willing to oblige you. If so, cultivate them."

"And what do I get for this service?" inquired

Colonel St. John, a keen, calculating expression for a moment lighting up his dim eyes.

"When the work is satisfactorily completed," replied Count Valdmir slowly, "you will receive from my Government an adequate compensation. From me you obtain your personal safety. The day is past, Colonel, when you could dictate your own terms."

The muscles of the old man's face were twitching uncontrollably. He leaned forward and moistened his parched lips with his tongue.

"I saw *him* yesterday," he whispered hoarsely.

"Lyndhurst?"

He nodded.

"He turned and looked after me," he continued, dropping his voice still lower. "I believe he followed me, although I did not look around. He never saw me but once, yet I think he remembers me."

"If he finds you," said Count Valdmir with a short laugh, "your days of liberty and usefulness are over. However, let us return to business. Are you familiar with the present international controversy?"

"I have some knowledge of it."

"Good! You recall the Rootschook muddle? Well, it is necessary that I ascertain the policy of this Government in regard to it. I desire the entire history from the beginning to the end. I have reason to believe that the most important papers will soon be in my possession, but there will be others of great value. Now, follow closely what I say; I wish your whole attention, Colonel."

And Colonel St. John, with a visible effort, concentrated his wandering thoughts and listened intently as his companion spoke slowly and concisely, carefully em-

phasizing certain words and instinctively lowering his voice, while the candles on the table spluttered in the draught from the loose casing about the window, and the gnawing of a mouse in the empty hall seemed painfully distinct.

Suddenly Count Valdmir sprang to his feet.

"There is someone else in this house!" he exclaimed angrily. "Who is it?"

"There is no one, Count."

"I tell you I felt someone look across my shoulder as we bent over the table just now. I even heard someone breathe."

He clutched his companion by the shoulder and held him as though in a vice.

"By Heaven!" he said through his clinched teeth, "if I thought you were playing a double game——"

But the ashen face and trembling limbs of the old man refuted the accusation even better than the eager protestations which poured from his lips, and the utter absence of anything to break the monotony of mouldy walls and bare boards, save their own two wooden chairs and deal table, demonstrated the impossibility of concealment.

"Well," said Count Valdmir, releasing his companion, "I believe you, Colonel, and it is fortunate for you that I do. When I begin to doubt you I shall have no scruples about informing the police of your whereabouts." He picked up his hat and smoothed it carefully.

"I will go now," he remarked, "as I have another engagement before dinner. A busy evening, but profitable. Good-night, Colonel."

Colonel St. John accompanied his guest to the front

door and stood a moment watching him descend the steps. As he turned to reënter the house the candle in his hand suddenly went out, leaving the hall in total darkness. He carefully groped his way towards the dining-room, but stopped abruptly.

"Who is here?" he demanded. "Who is it, I say?"

There was an instant's intense silence, then the sound of quick, panting breath and a sudden blast of cold air.

Colonel St. John stumbled forward and pushed open the dining-room door. Grasping the remaining candle, he returned to the hall; it was quite empty, but the door at the back, leading into the garden, stood open and the wind blew it back and forth upon its creaking hinges. He closed it hastily, turning the rusty key with difficulty, and retraced his steps to the dining-room. Halfway across the hall he stopped irresolutely; the atmosphere was filled with a subtle perfume very different from the musty air he had previously inhaled. Colonel St. John sniffed curiously, then reached for his hat; in his younger days he had not been deficient in physical courage, but he lost no time in seeking the street, and drew a breath of heartfelt relief as he closed the door of the Octagon House behind him.

Meanwhile, in the old garden the water lay in little pools upon the neglected flower-beds and the paths were inch deep with sticky black mud. It was not an attractive place for an evening stroll, yet an irregular line of footsteps showed that someone had recently passed through, presumably taking a short cut from one street to the other. These footsteps had evidently been made by a man of at least average height, and they led directly to the gap in the old brick wall at the back of the garden. Sticking in the mud at the base of the wall was

an overshoe, small and lined with fur—a shoe such as ladies wear over their slippers when in evening dress. It did not seem applicable to the footprints in the garden.

X

SENATOR BYRD was giving a dinner and was conscious that it dragged heavily. As the guests were carefully selected, food and wine unexceptionable, and the serving beyond criticism, the Senator was puzzled.

The Secretary of State had arrived alone, bearing Mrs. Redmond's apologies; she was prostrated by a severe headache and quite unable to be present. The Hon. Cecil Lyndhurst, for whom the dinner was given, had been unexpectedly, unaccountably late, and had not, in the Senator's opinion, offered good and sufficient reason for this breach of etiquette.

Then too Isabel added to her father's annoyance by not appearing until after dinner was announced, wearing a gown of which he had expressed emphatic disapproval, and subsiding into utter silence as she took her place between Monsieur du Pré and Mr. Rivers. The Senator's brows darkened as he observed the listless manner of his daughter and the forced animation of his guests. He liked conversation at his dinners to be spontaneous and laughter genuine, and could detect the real article immediately.

Mrs. Chesley, at the head of the table, was totally unconscious of her brother's chagrin. To her the dinner was much like many others; her purple velvet was highly satisfactory and the canvas-backs cooked to a turn. What more could be desired? Therefore, when she felt his eye fixed upon her she returned his gaze of

gloomy disapproval with a smile so vapid and vacuous that it proved the last straw to the harassed Senator. Bestowing a frown upon his innocent sister which caused her to drop her fork in astonishment, he turned hastily to the lady on his right and endeavored to sustain his reputation of a genial and delightful host, but she was afterwards heard to remark that she had rarely been so bored, and considered Senator Byrd a much overrated person.

Monsieur du Pré and Mr. Rivers only were unaffected by the depressed atmosphere. The former was making a very substantial meal indeed, and the latter seemed exhilarated but self-absorbed. After one or two unsuccessful attempts to engage Isabel in conversation he relapsed into a preoccupied silence, totally oblivious of his other neighbor, who finally turned her white shoulder very markedly towards him and pointedly ignored his proximity.

"And now, Mr. Lyndhurst," remarked Mrs. Chesley in the patronizing manner a certain type of person usually adopts towards a foreigner, "what is your opinion of Washington?"

"I have found it altogether delightful, Mrs. Chesley."

"Of course," she resumed, helping herself to salted almonds, "you have been to the Capitol. How do our House and Senate compare with your Parliament, for instance?"

"What particularly impressed *me* with the House of Representatives," interrupted Monsieur du Pré, "is the freedom of speech permitted its members."

"All men are born free and equal," responded Mr. Rivers, rousing himself abruptly; "that is our Declaration, you know."

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"I went down there," continued Monsieur du Pré discursively, "to listen to a debate. I found two gentlemen gesticulating and both talking at once; they grew more irate every moment and finally one shook his fist at the other. I thought pistols imminent, and felt sure the friendship of a lifetime was irrevocably broken, for I had often seen them together. I thought how sad it was such things could happen. Then, what followed? As I left the Capitol that afternoon I saw the same two gentlemen strolling down the steps before me, arm-in-arm; they laughted and chatted, evidently in the best of spirits, and made an engagement to dine together that evening. I have the good fortune to know one of them, so I approached him after they had separated and expressed my pleasure that the breach was so quickly healed."

"Well," said Mr. Rivers, as the little Frenchman paused for breath, "well, what then?"

"He looked at me in astonishment and inquired what I meant; I explained I had been in the Diplomatic Gallery of the House that afternoon and had heard with sorrow the bitter dispute. He immediately drew himself up very tall and erect and looked over my head. 'I vote and argue for the good of my district,' he said very stiffly, 'but, by Gad, sir, I choose my own friends.'"

"And that," said Senator Byrd, laughing, "is a privilege claimed by most men, I believe, regardless of country."

Mrs. Chesley shook her head doubtfully, as though she could dispute this point if she desired, and admired her rings as they caught the light; she thought she might perhaps have added the hoop of rubies, after all, without overloading her fingers.

Isabel played with her fork, sending course after course away untouched, and was plainly relieved when dinner came to an end and she could retire to the piano in the drawing-room, whither Lyndhurst speedily followed.

Isabel was playing softly, her red-gold hair gleaming under the chandelier and her gray eyes persistently lowered. The young Englishman watched her in silence. Fate had thrown them frequently together since Mrs. Redmond's ball, and this particular type of American continued to interest him greatly.

"There is something on your gown," he exclaimed suddenly, "allow me."

Taking out his handkerchief he brushed her skirt lightly. The black spot on its gauzy, pale-blue surface remained unchanged and a hasty movement on her part disclosed another and larger discolored place at the edge of her satin petticoat. Dropping his handkerchief, he touched it with his finger, then glanced up quickly. The skirt was stained by mud and water and still very wet.

Isabel twitched it from him and brought her hands down upon the keys tumultuously.

"Yes, it's wet," she said defiantly, as though challenging inquiry.

The Hon. Cecil was puzzled. The girl was evidently excited, as her unnaturally bright eyes and the color which came and went so fitfully indisputably demonstrated. Also, he believed, she was not far from a nervous collapse. He had sisters of his own and knew there are times when very deft handling is necessary if one would avoid trouble. So he stroked his fair mustache affectionately and reflected carefully before speaking.

"There's a jolly little room at the head of the stairs," he remarked suggestively at last; "I noticed it as I came in. It is very nice and quiet and the chairs looked uncommonly comfortable."

"My sitting-room," said Isabel with a gasp of relief; "yes, let us go there."

"Miss Byrd," he said quietly as they entered the room and he drew forward a low chair, "will you not have a glass of wine? You ate no dinner—I sat opposite, you know——"

Isabel swept her skirts about her with a hasty movement which brought the wet spot again into prominence.

"It was horrid in you to notice it," she said petulantly—"horrid."

"I beg your pardon," he apologized contritely, "I did not mean to vex you."

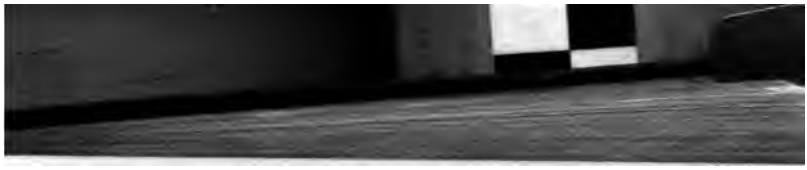
But Isabel was not yet appeased.

"Look at that muddy place on your shoe," she continued reproachfully. "I saw it, but I did not think it necessary to call the attention of the whole room to it. And there is some on your cuff too."

It was quite true. Upon the heel of his patent-leather shoe freshly dried mud was thickly plastered; also a large spot marred the under side of an otherwise immaculate cuff.

"It's just as black as the place on my skirt," continued Isabel, who evidently agreed with the theory that the best mode of defence is by attack, "and (perhaps you don't know it) there is quite a long splash on the back of your coat; the servants should have brushed you, of course, but I suppose you came so late they had not time."

The Hon. Cecil gravely examined his cuff.



"They do match, don't they?" he remarked pleasantly, comparing it with the stain on her skirt.

"On the whole," she resumed triumphantly,—"on the whole, Mr. Lyndhurst, you are more spotted than I."

Isabel touched her skirt gingerly.

"I think it is drying a little, don't you?" she inquired anxiously.

A ripple of laughter from the drawing-room floated up the stairs, and a servant entered with a tray containing small cups of black coffee. Isabel took one and drank it eagerly, while her companion, holding his cup in his hand, toyed absently with the spoon and watched her; his eyes were troubled as well as puzzled and, notwithstanding the composure of his manner, it was evident he was holding himself well in hand.

"You see," said Isabel with an effort, "just before dinner, after I was dressed and ready, I heard of a friend who—who was in trouble, and, of course, I wanted to help—it. And I did not want anyone to know. And now this horrid stain, and—and everything."

"I hope," he said gently, "you were able to assist your friend."

"No," she replied with a shake of the head, "that's just it. I didn't help at all. I—I fear I did harm by going. But I meant well."

Her voice shook slightly in spite of her effort to control it, and she pushed her cup aside on the small table beside her and groped vainly for her handkerchief.

"I wish you'd look the other way," she exclaimed impatiently, "I hate to be stared at."

The Hon. Cecil was conscious that he could not hold himself quite as well in check as he had believed; he felt

a sudden and irresistible desire to put his arm about the slender figure and wipe the tears from the long lashes. He took her hand in both of his, and her hair brushed against his cheek as he stooped over her.

"Don't cry," he whispered, "it hurts me. Don't cry—Isabel."

Isabel rolled her handkerchief into a moist little ball and rose suddenly.

"I think I ought to tell you," she said, with a little laugh which was half a sob, "that this afternoon Mr. Rivers asked me to marry him and I said I would. I thought you might be interested."

He released her hand and straightened himself suddenly.

"I congratulate you," he said slowly. "You were right, I am—interested."

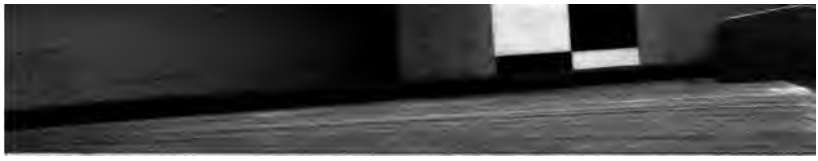
"It will be quite a long engagement," she continued, her fingers nervously interlocked—"a year, I hope; I mean, of course, I hope the wedding will be in a year's time. But then one can never tell what may happen."

"I congratulate you," he said again, "Mr. Rivers is a very brilliant man. I have heard him mentioned as a possible member of the next Cabinet."

"Yes," she said, "I know. And father is pleased too; they are friends, although Mr. Rivers is much younger. Shall we return to the drawing-room? And—Mr. Lyndhurst——"

"Yes, Miss Byrd."

"Please forget how foolish I have been to-night. I am very well, and, of course, very happy. I was a little nervous, I think, and I fear I was rude when you only meant to be kind; please forgive me. And please also forget everything, will you?"



" There is nothing to remember, Miss Byrd, except what you have just told me."

The guests were preparing to take their leave as they returned to the drawing-room, and Isabel, with some compunctions of conscience, endeavored to perform a few neglected duties in regard to entertaining her father's friends.

The Secretary of State was the first to depart. He drew her aside with a whispered word of congratulation and watched her face keenly as they talked.

" Your father told me," he said, " and I want to be the first to wish you the happiness you deserve. I was astonished, Isabel; you have kept your friends completely in the dark, my dear."

He stooped and kissed her forehead, taking her face between his hands and looking earnestly into her gray eyes.

" God bless you, my dear," he said gently. " May you be as happy as Estelle and I. There can be no better fortune in life for you than that. Good-night."

The Secretary drove quickly home through the wet streets and went at once to Mrs. Redmond's dressing-room. She half rose from the couch as he approached and held out both hands in welcome.

" It's perfectly absurd, of course," she said, with a little laugh, " but when you go anywhere without me I'm wretched until you come back."

The flowing lace sleeve of her white dressing-gown fell away from her rounded arm, with its faint tracery of blue veins; the Secretary liked to follow their course with the tip of his finger and also to hold the small white hand which wore the plain gold band and lay so willingly in his.

"Was the evening very long?" he inquired tenderly. "Poor little girl! And how is the head?"

"It is really better, John—almost well, in fact. Tell me about the dinner; I was especially sorry not to go with you to-night."

"Well," he returned reflectively, "you did not miss very much. It was deadly dull, absolutely the only stupid dinner I ever knew Byrd to give."

"Tell me who was there and all about it."

So he told her all the little details he knew she wished to hear, and she listened attentively, occasionally laughing at some anecdote or interrupting with some trivial question, while outside the wind increased in violence and rain splashed against the windows, running down the panes in little rivers and forming small ponds upon the stone sill, thus accentuating the warmth and color of the rose-tinted room.

He pressed his cheek to hers as he spoke, but started in astonishment.

"Why, Estelle," he exclaimed, rapidly passing his hand over her head, "your hair is wet!"

Mrs. Redmond sat suddenly upright and pushed aside his hand. Her breath came quickly and a round red spot glowed on either cheek.

"Don't, John," she said wearily, "my head is very sensitive. Please don't touch it."

"But see," he returned, holding out his hand for her inspection, "only see how wet my fingers are."

Mrs. Redmond took the hand in both of hers and laid her cheek against it.

"You dear old silly," she said languidly, "my head was so hot and ached so badly I had Josephine put crushed ice on it. I was too vain to let you see me tied

up in a towel, so I took it off when I heard you coming, but, of course, my hair is wet."

The Secretary smiled indulgently and returned to the subject of Isabel Byrd's engagement. Mrs. Redmond sank back again upon the couch and listened quietly with closed eyes.

"By the way," he said reflectively, "isn't it about time *we* entertained Lyndhurst?"

The lace upon the bosom of her gown moved suddenly and a pause ensued.

"He has been here, dear," she said at last; "you forget the ball."

"But that is not enough," he objected, rolling the end of the ribbon at her waist about his fingers and slowly smoothing it out again, "we must give a dinner for him and ask the other diplomats. We should have done so before this."

"*All* of them, John?"

"Estelle," he exclaimed, laughing, "I believe you are getting lazy. For the first time since our marriage you are shirking responsibility."

"I dislike the English," said Mrs. Redmond in general condemnation; "as a rule they are so stolid and heavy; they remind me of underdone bread."

"Well," returned the Secretary, relinquishing the ribbon, "I admit this young fellow attracts me. There is nothing stolid about him, I assure you; on the contrary, he is remarkably alert. I have met him officially as well as socially, of course, and I think you will like him when you know him."

Mrs. Redmond pushed aside the heavy hair which had fallen over her forehead and turned her face away from the light.

"We will have the dinner, dear," she said gently, "and invite the whole Diplomatic Corps if you say so. I think a large affair would be best, don't you?"

"I will leave it entirely to you," he replied. "I know I am in safe hands, although they are very small to be so capable."

The Secretary was much given to such old-fashioned gallantries. Although he had been married five years, he was as much in love with his wife as the day he had gone with her to the little church in Paris and placed upon her finger the small golden band.

XI

THE fire in Mrs. Redmond's sitting-room burned cheerfully, casting flickering shadows upon the brass andirons and crackling sociably; it was a fire to invite easy-chairs and confidences; or, if one happened to be alone, to sit beside and dream, for there were pictures in it and castles in the air roundabout if one cared to look for them.

The mistress of the room sat in a low chair, her hands clasped idly in her lap and the tip of her slipper upon the fender. She was one of the few people capable of absolute inaction and had been sitting motionless for the past hour, her head resting upon the silk cushion at the back of her chair and her eyes partly closed, as though the dark lashes were too heavy for the white lids they fringed and had weighed them down. She was a study for an artist as she sat there in the dusk of the short winter's day, with the firelight casting its ruddy glow upon the rich folds of her gown and reflecting itself in the dark, polished floor. A casual observer would doubtless have labelled the picture "Repose," but if one looked again one could detect a tired expression about the mouth and a reluctant expectancy in the whole attitude the reverse of restful. The clock on the mantel chimed, and she frowned a little.

"A half hour late," she said aloud as the door opened and Count Valdmir entered quietly.

"I thought I would announce myself," he remarked as he crossed the room. "It was not too much of a liberty in an old friend, was it?"

Mrs. Redmond moved the glass screen which lay in her lap and held it between her face and the fire.

"I said four o'clock," she remarked abruptly; "it is now half-past."

"I apologize," he returned, "the delay was unavoidable. I may sit down?"

She bowed distantly.

"You were dreaming when I came in," he resumed. "You used to dream away whole days in Berlin, I remember. A habit is like a perfume—it clings to one."

"I was not dreaming," she interrupted sharply, "I was thinking of you."

"I am flattered, Madame."

They spoke in French, a language in which both were proficient, and their words were chosen with care.

"I was wondering," she continued slowly, "if you had a heart."

"A heart," said Count Valdmir reflectively, "is the instrument by means of which our blood is circulated; we all possess them, do we not?"

She moved impatiently, and he bent forward that he might see her face.

"I have a heart, Madame," he said quietly, "although I have but lately become aware of the fact myself. Shall I tell you how I know?"

"It does not interest me," she returned coldly.

A servant entered, replenished the fire, and noiselessly withdrew; Count Valdmir watched him in silence and smiled sceptically.

"So!" he said, when they were again alone, "a

daughter of Eve, yet not curious. Is that not an anomaly?"

"It is only the unsophisticated who are curious," returned Mrs. Redmond slowly. "When one has actually tasted the apple, one's teeth are set on edge forever—it is so sour."

"You speak bitterly, Madame."

"Perhaps so, Count Valdmir."

Again he leaned forward that he might see her face more clearly.

"Tell me," he said after a long pause, "do you ever live the old days over in memory, or is the past dead as well as buried?"

"It is not even buried," she replied, "it rises from the grave I dug for it and follows me everywhere."

"Then you sometimes think of Berlin?"

"Often, Count."

"With regret?"

"With deep regret."

"I too, Madame, regret my lost opportunities. Like you, I wish I might live that part of my life over again."

"Do not misunderstand me," said Mrs. Redmond distinctly, "my regret is not that the old days are gone, but that they ever existed at all."

"You are happy, yes?" he said interrogatively.

"I scarcely suppose," she returned indifferently, "you asked for this interview simply to discuss my happiness or misery. I presume you want something; what is it?"

"I want to know," he said deliberately, "why you failed to keep your appointment on Thursday evening."

"You *do* know, Count Valdmir."

"But not enough. You started and lost your way;

you also lost the kernel from the nut, as it were. A curious coincidence, and one worthy of much thought."

"They were lost, I tell you—*lost*," she whispered hoarsely.

"Even as the Khedive's opals were lost," he returned slowly.

Mrs. Redmond caught the back of a chair and steadied herself against it.

"Count Valdmir," she said with a visible effort at self-control, "I cannot allow you to insult me in my own house. You will apologize for your insinuation at once, if you please."

"I think," he replied with an unpleasant laugh, "that Mrs. Redmond has lived so long in Washington she is inclined to forget Berlin."

She put her finger on the electric bell in the wall beside her.

"I am not afraid of you, Count," she said quietly, "not yet, at least. You are too wise a man to throw away a tool before it has served its purpose. If I touch this button I will tell my servants to show you out and not admit you again. Shall I ring?"

"Madame," he returned, with a slight bow, "when you are angry you are superb. I apologize."

Mrs. Redmond resumed her chair and again took possession of the glass screen.

"I have told you all I know," she said coldly, after a long pause.

There are almost as many kinds of silence as there are types of humanity, and while nothing is more soothing and delightful than the prolonged quiet of real camaraderie, it is equally true that nothing is more exhausting than the silence of distrust or contempt.

The little French clock on the mantel ticked rapidly as though hurrying time away, and the fire blazed merrily, sending an occasional spark over the fender and out into the room, while the winter's day waned and the twilight deepened.

"Is there anything else?" finally inquired Mrs. Redmond without turning her head.

Count Valdmir carefully extinguished a spark which had fallen upon the rug and lay smouldering there.

"Yes, Madame," he said slowly, "there *is* something more. I earnestly desire an appointment for a friend."

"An appointment?"

"A temporary clerkship in the Department of State. The man is old and poor. A worthy charity."

"A friend of yours," she said with a short laugh, "and a worthy charity?"

"Even so, Madame."

"It could be arranged, I suppose," she said unwillingly, "if it is absolutely necessary."

"I should not ask it otherwise, Madame."

Mrs. Redmond went to her desk and produced a small memorandum-book.

"Be good enough to give me his name and address," she said briefly. "I do not promise this appointment, but I will make a note of it."

"His name, Madame, is Joseph Sanders. He lives at Jackson City, a small town in Virginia."

"Joseph Sanders," she repeated as she wrote it down, "an excellent *alias*—non-committal and respectable. I think, Count, I will be obliged to know a little more about Mr. Sanders before I interest myself in his behalf."

He watched her enter the name and raised his eyebrows slightly as she spoke.

"I think not, Madame," he said confidently; "your naturally kind heart will prompt you to assist the needy without making useless inquiries concerning them. In the course of the next few weeks my friend will be installed, I am sure. He is, by the way, an American by birth."

"And by adoption—what?"

"A man without a country, Madame; there are many such wanderers."

Mrs. Redmond returned the book to her desk and faced her companion.

"You received my invitation to dinner?"

"This morning only. I shall, of course, accept."

"I thought you would. Force of circumstances obliged me to ask you—your official position and my husband's, you understand?"

"I was not unduly flattered by the attention," he returned dryly.

"The dinner," continued Mrs. Redmond, speaking slowly and distinctly, "is given for the new British Attaché, Mr. Lyndhurst."

Count Valdmir had risen and was standing with his back to the fireplace, watching her every movement closely. She drew a long-stemmed rose from the vase upon the desk and crossed the room towards him, moving with a languid grace peculiarly her own, the flower hanging loosely from her hand and her small head held proudly erect. Resuming the low chair before the fire, she slowly lifted the rose and inhaled its perfume, then looked directly at her companion, undeniable challenge in her blue eyes.

"The dinner," she repeated, "is given for Mr. Lyndhurst."

The ticking of the little clock seemed obtrusively loud as the man and woman gazed at each other in silence. He bent forward eagerly that he might see her face more distinctly in the gathering dusk and the pupils of his eyes dilated strangely, a sudden, passionate light replacing their usual calm coldness.

With an involuntary movement he stooped over her, his quick breath stirring the loose tendrils of hair about her ears.

"Estelle," he murmured softly, "Estelle."

The blue eyes widened as they gazed helplessly up at him as though fascinated, a blank, baffled expression gradually replacing their first angry surprise.

Count Valdmir was speaking again, speaking hurriedly, his incoherent words crowding rapidly upon one another and his face coming gradually closer as his voice grew lower, and his pulses throbbed painfully. And Mrs. Redmond was listening—listening with a curious sense of remote unreality and the trembling stillness with which a bird watches the cat who, having charmed it, prepares to spring.

"You shall not be troubled," he was saying; "I can shield you if you will let me. Estelle, I have wanted you always,—do you understand?—always."

She made an effort to rise, but he put her gently back.

"You need not fear Lyndhurst," he continued breathlessly. "With me you need fear no one. I want you, Star of the World, I want you."

Mrs. Redmond shook off his restraining hand and sprang to her feet.

"How dare you?" she gasped. "How dare you?"

With unsteady fingers she switched on the electric light and pointed to the door. Count Valdmir took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead. The pupils of his eyes contracted as suddenly as they had expanded, and the eyes themselves resumed their habitually keen expression.

"Perhaps it was as well, Madame," he said, alluding to the light, "the situation was becoming somewhat strained."

Mrs. Redmond tried to speak, but her lips refused to articulate; she was very pale and her eyes glittered ominously.

"Let us discuss the question coolly," he remarked, stooping to pick up the red rose, which had fallen to the floor. "I offer you absolute security, peace of mind, safety—what you will. In return I ask—what? A few sugarplums: a kiss now and then perhaps—nothing more than men have asked of you before, Madame, if my memory serves me rightly."

She pressed the button in the wall beside her without replying.

"It is a small price to pay for safety," he continued. "I am better as your friend than your enemy, Madame. I can be merciless when it serves my purpose."

"I know," she said slowly, "I know."

"I hold your happiness in the hollow of my hand. You are brave, Madame; you possess courage few men can boast,—I admire it,—but it will avail you nothing if I elect to speak."

"I have done all you asked," she said mechanically.

"Not quite all, Madame. Somehow you have bungled; it is not in your nature to fail, therefore I am suspicious."

"What I told you is true, Count Valdmir; I swear it."

He moved impulsively forward and seized her hands.

"I want you to be happy," he said softly; "it's such a small thing I ask: only a few caresses—only an occasional moment out of your life. How little! Kiss me, Estelle, and promise what I ask. Kiss me now, *yourself*, and the slate is sponged clean. Come to me, Star of the World, and be at rest."

He dropped her hands hastily as the door opened and retreated a few paces, pulling to pieces the red rose and breathing heavily.

"James," said Mrs. Redmond to the footman who stood awaiting orders, "Count Valdmir is going. Show him out."

"And," said James later in the butler's pantry in indignant narrative, "when I handed him his hat, most respectful and polite, he up and cussed me, that's what he done."

XII

"ISABEL," remarked Mrs. Redmond to Miss Byrd as the latter entered the library, "don't ever marry a member of the Cabinet."

"Why not?" inquired Miss Byrd; "you seem to get a good deal of pleasure out of it."

"It's the awful question of precedence at dinner and things," said Mrs. Redmond vaguely, her white forehead puckered ominously. "I literally quake all over when we do our duty and invite the diplomats for fear I will somehow blunder. Suppose, now, I should happen to put the premier of the corps in the middle of the table."

"As a centrepiece," suggested Isabel, laughing, "he might be very effective, I should think."

"You know what I mean. And they are always being recalled, or dying, or changing somehow. It is enough to turn one's hair white."

"Oh Estelle," said Isabel, laughing again, "this from you, and I know you absolutely revel in your position because of the way you can chatter in foreign languages. You would not change places with any woman living, and you know it."

Mrs. Redmond became suddenly grave.

"I declare to you, Isabel," she said earnestly, "if John would resign and take me out West somewhere,—on a ranch, I think,—away from it all, I believe I would be the happiest woman in the world."

"Well, I like it," replied Isabel as she sank into a comfortable low chair and removed her gloves. "I like rubbing elbows with other nations and meeting all sorts of interesting people, although it does make me realize sometimes what a very insignificant person Miss Isabel Byrd is, after all."

"My elbows are already sore from too much rubbing," remarked Mrs. Redmond ruefully, and they both laughed.

"What magnificent orchids," exclaimed Isabel suddenly. "Whence, Estelle?"

"Count Valdmir," returned Mrs. Redmond briefly, adding emphatically, "I dislike orchids as much as one *can* dislike a flower."

"Count Valdmir," repeated Isabel as she pulled a blossom or so into greater prominence, "he of the waxed mustache and sphinx-like smile. I think, Estelle, I dislike Count Valdmir as much as *one can* dislike a man—and sometimes that means a lot."

"He dines here to-night," remarked Mrs. Redmond as she crossed the room and stood looking at the girl as she sat in the low chair with the sunlight touching her hair lovingly and turning it into burnished gold.

Isabel's hair was her father's pride and the chronic despair of her aunt, as it would not lend itself to any prescribed form of coiffure, but rebelliously put forth curling tendrils where least expected, as though laughing at the bare idea of restraint. Mrs. Chesley had been heard to say, during the chrysalis period of her niece's development, that her red hair and pug nose were calamities which might be borne with pious resignation were it not for the wayward spirit which accompanied them and from which she was a daily sufferer. Time,

indeed, had shaped the inquiring nose into a piquant and most attractive appendage, and had softened the hue of the objectionable tresses into a rich red-gold, the delight of artists, but Mrs. Chesley was of the opinion that the ungovernable spirit merely smouldered and might be roused at short notice.

Mrs. Redmond sat down upon the arm of the chair and her eyes involuntarily followed the ray of light cast by the diamond upon the plump white hand lying lightly in the girl's lap. It was a very handsome diamond, and compelled attention, so Mrs. Redmond thought, almost obtrusively.

"Mr. Rivers," she said slowly, "has regretted."

"Yes," replied Isabel quietly, "he had another engagement. He was very sorry."

Estelle Redmond turned suddenly and took her friend's face between her hands, looking earnestly into the gray eyes, which clouded a little and failed to respond to her affectionate gaze with their customary frankness.

"Why did you do it?" she said impulsively; "tell me, Isabel."

"Why does anybody want to get married?" returned Isabel, laughing impatiently and turning her head away from the inquiring eyes. "Why did you do it yourself, for that matter?"

"Ah," said Mrs. Redmond quickly, "that's different."

She looked involuntarily towards a photograph of her husband, and, rising, placed it further back on the mantel where it was in no danger of falling, touching it gently and relinquishing it half regretfully, while the girl watched her curiously.

"Estelle," she said almost timidly, "did you love him that way before you were married, or did it come later?

"Ah, no," she continued hastily, as her companion was about to reply, "don't tell me. I don't think I want to know. But you *do* love your husband more and more all the time, Estelle, don't you?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Redmond softly, "more and more every day."

"And you are happy, married? Happier than when you were a girl? Aunt Mary says that every right-minded woman——"

"I am happy," interrupted Mrs. Redmond, speaking quickly and emphatically, "so happy, Isabel, that I would be quite willing to give up all chance of heaven hereafter in order to preserve my heaven upon earth."

"I don't quite understand, Estelle."

"I mean," said Mrs. Redmond, speaking to the picture on the mantel rather than to the girl listening wide-eyed in the low chair, "I mean that I possess the love and respect of a good man, and there is nothing in the world I would not do rather than to lose it."

"But, Estelle," interrupted Isabel in a puzzled voice, "of course you expect your husband to love and respect you, every woman does. I don't understand——"

"And please God you never will," said Mrs. Redmond earnestly, adding cheerfully, "and now my solemn mood has gone. It was all your fault, anyhow, for getting engaged so quietly that you stole a march even on me. Let me see your ring. And how about Mr. Leigh, Isabel, and others I could mention?"

Isabel turned her ring slowly around her finger and watched the diamond as it caught the light.

"Estelle," she said gravely, "I think I'd like to tell you something."

"About Mr. Leigh?"

Isabel did not reply at once. She rested her chin on her hand and gazed straight before her, a troubled look in her gray eyes and a serious expression about the lips usually so prone to curve into infectious smiles displaying captivating little dimples where least expected.

"Well?" said Mrs. Redmond after waiting some minutes in silence.

"One afternoon," began Isabel slowly, "I was in the library at home—in the curtained alcove, you know."

Mrs. Redmond nodded and drew up her chair.

"I know," she said.

"Well," resumed Isabel with an evident effort, "I think I must have fallen into a doze, for I don't remember anything especial until I heard voices in the library. It was father and Mr. Rivers, and they seemed to have been talking a long time. The first thing I heard distinctly was Mr. Rivers saying very positively, 'I believe Leigh is the guilty man,' and then, Estelle, of course I waked right up and listened with all my might."

"Of course," assented Mrs. Redmond.

"Father said doubtfully, 'The Secretary has every confidence in him,' and Mr. Rivers said, 'That doesn't prove anything. A child could pull wool over his eyes if it wanted to.'"

"Mr. Rivers did not know what he was talking about," remarked Mrs. Redmond indignantly, but Isabel continued her story without noticing the interruption.

"They talked a long time, and I gathered that an important paper had been stolen from the State Department. Father said Mr. Leigh was certainly respon-

sible and that decisive steps of some sort ought to be taken at once, and Mr. Rivers——"

Mrs. Redmond had turned her head so that her face was in the shadow.

"Well," she said almost sharply, "what did Mr. Rivers say?"

"He said," replied Isabel gravely, "that he had been having Mr. Leigh watched, 'shadowed' was the word. It sounds horrid, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does," agreed Mrs. Redmond with a little shiver.

"And that he hoped matters would soon be brought to a climax. And when he said that, Estelle, I think I hated him."

"Go on," said Mrs. Redmond briefly.

"There was a good deal more," continued Isabel reflectively, "and presently father said he thought he could test Mr. Leigh that very afternoon, as he expected him on some business for the Secretary. He suggested that they make up a bundle of blank papers and label it 'Roostchook,' then let them lie on the table and leave Mr. Leigh alone in the room. Father said he felt sure the papers would remain untouched, but Mr. Rivers thought not.

"I know it was not very honorable to listen to all this, but I couldn't help it, Estelle, I just couldn't. I felt angry that they should suspect Mr. Leigh, or anyone else, of such a thing, and I wanted to stay there myself and watch to prove they were wrong, and then tell them just what I thought of them. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes, dear, I understand."

"Well," resumed the girl, with heightened color,

" they fixed up the papers and smoked awhile without saying anything, and then all at once Mr. Rivers began talking about me, saying he wanted to marry me. I was so surprised I nearly tumbled out of the alcove and spoiled everything, and I almost wish I had."

" I wish so too, Isabel."

" Father said," went on Isabel hurriedly, " how pleased he would be and all that sort of thing, and then the door-bell rang and they went upstairs. It was Mr. Leigh, and he came into the library and sat down by the table with those miserable papers right under his nose. After awhile he saw them."

Mrs. Redmond was leaning forward now, listening intently to every word, a curious light in her blue eyes.

" Go on," she said breathlessly, " go on."

He picked them up and turned them over and over and studied the outside wrapper. It had ' Roostchook—Confidential,' printed very large on it in red ink; I could see it distinctly. He kept on turning them over doubtfully, and then, Estelle, he looked hastily behind him *and put them in his pocket.*"

"Ah!" Mrs. Redmond leaned back in her chair as though the tension had suddenly relaxed.

"Just then," continued Isabel, " father sent for Mr. Leigh and I could come out. I felt the way I used to feel as a child when I had been swinging too long—all light-headed and giddy, you know, with everything blurry. It's a horrid sensation."

" Well, I sat there in father's chair and thought it all over, and the more I thought the sorrier I felt for Mr. Leigh; although he had proved himself dishonorable, I did not want father and Mr. Rivers to know it, and, after all, it was only a bundle of blank papers and there

was no great harm done. And so, Estelle, I made up another package and printed 'Roostchook—Confidential' on it, just like the first. Father taught me how to print, and you can't tell my letters from his."

"You—made another package?" said Mrs. Redmond incredulously.

"Oh, yes," replied Isabel in a tired voice, "it was quite easy. I despise Mr. Leigh, of course, and have a contempt for him, but it is not necessary that anybody else should know."

Mrs. Redmond put her hand gently upon the bright hair.

"Poor little Isabel," she said softly.

"Just as I got them fixed," resumed Isabel quietly, "Mr. Rivers came in and looked at the table, and there was the bundle exactly as he put it, staring him right in the face. Then he saw me, and the first thing I knew he was asking me to marry him, and I said I would, Estelle, because it seemed to me I might as well do that as anything."

Mrs. Redmond had crossed the room and stood looking out over the broad avenue with compressed lips and moist lashes.

"Is that all?" she inquired, but without turning around.

"No," said Isabel hesitatingly, "not quite. It was that stormy Thursday when you were ill and could not dine with us—you remember, don't you?"

"Perfectly, Isabel."

"Well, after I was dressed it occurred to me I might go to Mr. Leigh and ask him to give back those papers, and perhaps he would explain why he took them. I thought I had plenty of time before dinner and it was

only kind to warn him about the shadowing. Anyhow, I went."

"You went, alone, to Mr. Leigh's lodgings!" exclaimed Mrs. Redmond, turning from the window in genuine astonishment. "*Isabel!*"

"Yes," said the girl quietly, "and I wish from the bottom of my heart I had stayed at home."

She paused uncertainly and looked anxiously at her companion.

"This is very confidential, Estelle," she said, with a little quiver in her voice, "but I must talk to someone, and Aunt Mary never understands things. I have been so worried——"

Mrs. Redmond drew the chair closer and sat down quietly, taking Isabel's hand in hers caressingly.

"Tell me all about it, dear," she said gently. "John says I am a good listener. Then we will talk the whole thing over and see what is best to be done."

"You are such a comfortable friend," returned Isabel gratefully, "and I feel it is so safe to talk to you. Where was I?"

"You had started for Mr. Leigh's lodgings," said Estelle, her voice a little mechanical and her eyes still following the flashing of the diamond upon the hand resting confidingly in hers.

"Well," resumed Isabel, "just before I got to the house Mr. Leigh himself came down the steps and turned in the opposite direction. Of course, I called to him, but he didn't hear me, and I tried to catch up with him, but he walked too quickly for me. It was blowing and raining and the streets were slippery. I had never been out alone at night before and I was awfully afraid, but I kept on following him, scarcely

knowing what I was doing, and oh, Estelle, he went——"

"Yes?" said Mrs. Redmond breathlessly as she paused a moment. "Where, Isabel, *where?*"

A sudden rustle of stiff silk became evident in the hall and a decided voice said crisply:

"No, you need not show me the way. I will announce myself."

"Aunt Mary," exclaimed Isabel with an impatient gesture as Mrs. Chesley sailed into the room with the manner of one confident of her welcome.

"I was sure I would find Isabel here," she remarked, placidly sinking into the most comfortable chair. "You should not let her monopolize so many of your mornings, my dear. I often say to her father that I really don't know what she would do without you."

Mrs. Redmond made an appropriate reply, and the conversation drifted into the subjects uppermost in Mrs. Chesley's mind,—clothes and servants,—while her niece relapsed into a silence she mentally deplored as sullen, and her hostess valiantly endeavored to maintain a courteous and interested manner in spite of the inopportune arrival of her visitor.

XIII

"How do I look?" inquired Mrs. Redmond some hours later, suddenly appearing in her husband's dressing-room.

There was but one answer possible and the Secretary promptly made it, stooping to kiss the white forehead and touch the beautifully dressed hair caressingly.

"I'm so glad you think so," she said, consulting the mirror anxiously. "This gown was an extravagance, John, but I do think it is a success."

"You need your opals," replied the Secretary, who took a genuine interest in all the details of his wife's toilet, "that string of pearls is too insignificant."

"You have a perfect passion for those opals," returned Mrs. Redmond with a little laugh, "and I don't like them at all. I had much rather wear the jewels you gave me."

"But it gives me so much pleasure to see you in them, dear. You should indulge an old man in such a harmless whim."

"You shall not call yourself old," said Mrs. Redmond, laying a soft little hand across his lips; "of course I will wear them if you really wish it. Will you ring for Josephine to get them for me?"

When the maid had departed on her errand Mrs. Redmond stepped back a few paces and looked critically at her husband.

"I'm not satisfied with your appearance, sir," she

said severely, "there are lines about your mouth and that horrid tired look in your eyes again. What is it, John?"

The Secretary sighed and adjusted his cuff.

"It is just the outcome of the day, Estelle," he replied; "those papers have not yet been found, and the President is much annoyed. I think I am getting too old for politics; every day, almost every hour, brings fresh anxieties, and I do not seem to have the ability to cope with them."

"Is it anything special, dear?"

"I think," replied the Secretary, putting his arm around her waist and seeming to derive some comfort from the action, "I think the thing which troubles me most is the knowledge that someone I trusted has deceived me. The papers were undoubtedly stolen by an employé of the Department and the thief has not been found, therefore I am growing suspicious of everybody, a most unhealthy atmosphere in which to live."

"John," said Mrs. Redmond as she carefully pinned a white carnation to the lapel of his coat, "perhaps the papers were not stolen after all; they may only be mislaid."

The Secretary shook his head positively.

"You don't understand the importance of the matter, Estelle," he said quietly; "they were not mislaid. The thief must be found, and he need expect no mercy from me whoever he may be."

"Whoever he may be," repeated Mrs. Redmond absently, putting the brushes on the dressing-table straight, "he—does not deserve any mercy, John. Do you really expect to find him?"

"Sooner or later he must be found," returned the

Secretary positively. "What he has done successfully once he will attempt again; the cleverest thief invariably steals one thing too much and in so doing overreaches himelf."

"Yes," she said breathlessly, "yes, I suppose so. Once too often, and then——"

"Here is Josephine with the opals," interrupted the Secretary cheerfully. "We will talk of something more interesting. Let me help you with your necklace."

With fingers much too large for the work, but strangely deft, nevertheless, he unclasped the string of pearls and replaced them with the opals, while Josephine skilfully adjusted the crescent in her mistress's dark hair.

"Estelle," he exclaimed as the maid withdrew, "you are the light of my eyes, you know, but sometimes you positively dazzle them."

Mrs. Redmond swept her skirt about her and made him a low courtesy.

"Come," she said, taking his arm, "we must go downstairs, it is time for our guests to arrive, and I want—oh John, I want this dinner to be absolutely perfect. If any *contretemps* occurs I think I should like to retire into strictly private life and exist on the memory of my past greatness."

They had entered the long drawing-room, glowing with light and fragrant with many flowers, offering by its subdued richness and unobtrusive beauty a silent testimonial to the alliance of wealth and good taste—a combination as rare as it is desirable.

"Suppose," said the Secretary, glancing carelessly about, "suppose, Estelle, I should tell you to-morrow morning that all this was gone forever and there was

nothing left. That you and I must begin at the beginning with just each other and our bread to earn, what then?"

Mrs. Redmond caught her breath and raised her eyes to his with an indescribably sweet expression.

"I think, John," she said gravely, "I should be almost glad, because I might then perhaps——"

"The Russian Ambassador and Countess Alexis," announced the footman impassively.

"Count Valdmir."

The Secretary and Mrs. Redmond advanced to meet their guests, who now arrived in quick succession and comprised the principal members of the Diplomatic Corps with a slight sprinkling of Americans prominent in Washington society by reason of politics or money.

Among the latter was the Hon. Joshua Grimes, multimillionaire, proprietor of the *Daily Messenger*, and Member of Congress from South Dakota. As Mr. Grimes himself would doubtless have remarked, he might look a little out of his element among his present associates, but when an emergency arose he thought he could show them who was the biggest duck in the puddle after all. And Mr. Grimes believed an emergency was near at hand.

To Lyndhurst the Member from South Dakota was an unfailing source of pleasure.

"He's so typical, don't you know," the Englishman confided to Miss Byrd on one occasion; "as a rule I have been disappointed in the American politician, but Mr. Grimes is most satisfactory."

Mr. Grimes, like many of his kind, was a faddist, and revelled in his ability to indulge himself in that direction; his hobby was precious stones, and again and

again his appraising eye sought Mrs. Redmond's opals with a covetous, wondering expression, as though almost resentful of her right of possession, and his fingers positively itched to touch them and assure himself of their reality.

Dinner ended, he gravitated in her direction that he might have a nearer view and perhaps glean a little information concerning them. Mrs. Redmond was seated upon a small divan beside Miss Byrd, who was chatting in a perfunctory manner with Count Valdmir, while Monsieur du Pré entertained his hostess with his usual volubility. As Mr. Grimes drew near the little Frenchman politely made way for him, but smiled as he observed his courteous gesture pass unnoticed and exchanged a quick glance with Lyndhurst, who had approached with the Secretary and stood facing Mrs. Redmond as she sat with her back to the light, her rich gown falling in graceful folds about her and the crescent in her hair scintillating brilliantly.

"Surely you are not leaving so early, Mr. Grimes," she remarked, under the impression that he had sought her to say good-night.

"I'm a man with one idea, Mrs. Redmond," returned Mr. Grimes, sitting down abruptly, "it's been so with me all my life."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Redmond politely.

"First it was money, or, rather, making it. Well, I got all I wanted, so it no longer interests me. Just now it's stones."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Redmond again.

"I've studied 'em a good bit," he continued slowly, "and I flatter myself I'm something of a judge. I know a good thing when I see it, and being a collector

I want one like it. Now I have some pretty good opals, but they are not a patch on those of yours. Would you mind telling me where you got them?"

Count Valdmir gave a scarcely perceptible glance across the sofa as he continued to discuss the ethics of golf with Miss Byrd, and Lyndhurst paused involuntarily before responding to the polite interest of the Secretary regarding Devonshire cream. The opal at Mrs. Redmond's throat glowed suddenly scarlet, a blue flame radiating therefrom as though flaunting its value before less costly jewels.

"Do you like them?" she replied quietly. "I'm so glad. I really don't know where they came from originally. They are simply family jewels, to be handed down from one generation to another."

"We are always dazzled when Mrs. Redmond wears her opals," said Monsieur du Pré with a slight bow.

"I never saw their equal—never," said Mr. Grimes, who was plainly much impressed.

"Nor I," said Count Valdmir, joining suddenly in the conversation, "nor I—except once."

"And where was that?"

"In Egypt, at the Court of the Khedive."

The Secretary glanced smilingly at his wife, while Lyndhurst adjusted his monocle and brought it to bear upon Count Valdmir; and by common consent they relegated Devonshire and its products to the background and joined the group about the divan.

"I suspect a romance," cried Isabel, laughing; "let us hear it, Count."

"Not at all a romance," he replied, addressing Miss Byrd, but looking beyond her at his hostess, "rather a curious superstition regarding them."

"I'm not much on superstitions," remarked Mr. Grimes parenthetically; "I reckon I never had time to tamper with 'em."

"Tell us, Count," urged Isabel again.

"Shall I, Madame?"

"Pray do," said Mrs. Redmond quietly.

"The Khedive's opals," began Count Valdmir slowly, "which, Madame, are quite as beautiful as yours and very similar, are not an enviable possession. In fact, they are weighted with a curse which brings bad luck to the one who wears them."

"All opals do," interrupted Isabel, "unless one's birthday is in October."

"*My* birthday is in June," said Mrs. Redmond with a little laugh.

"In the beginning," resumed Count Valdmir, "or so the subjects of the Khedive believe, these opals were translucent stones, pure and exquisite, but without fire or color. They were the property of a Khedive's favorite many centuries ago. She was, of course, young and beautiful, but apparently indiscreet, for she fell in love with an officer of the Palace Guard and even raised her veil to show him her face. How she happened to see him, in spite of the restrictions of the harem, I have forgotten, also how she managed to escape. They were, however, discovered floating down the Nile together in a boat and promptly captured; she was adorned with the opals. The man was executed."

"And the girl," inquired Isabel as he paused for an instant, "what of her?"

"Her hands were bound," he replied impressively, "and she was deprived of her veil and turned out into the streets, still wearing the jewels. To speak with her

or provide her with food or shelter was punishable with death, and she wandered about the streets an outcast until she succumbed to starvation. Before she died she cursed the stones she wore and the man who gave them to her, and prayed that her spirit might enter into them and bring bad luck to those who wore them, even as they had brought disgrace to her."

"A very vindictive young woman," said Monsieur du Pré lightly.

"And so," continued Count Valdmir slowly, "the opals glow and fade and glow again, even as the hearts of those who wear them burn, turn cold, and grow passionately hot once more. It is also said——"

"Well?" inquired Mrs. Redmond as he paused uncertainly.

"It is also said, Madame, that the Khedive's opals are most brilliant when the heart of the wearer is most troubled and unhappy, and that should they by any chance come into the possession of an absolutely happy woman they would lose their evil power, their fiery beauty would vanish, and the stones themselves would become cracked and worthless."

"Rot!" ejaculated Mr. Grimes in an audible aside while moving disgustedly away, and the little group dispersed as the Secretary proposed music as a balm to their lacerated feelings, and escorted Miss Byrd to the piano.

Lyndhurst turned to speak to his hostess, but the trivial remark he had intended to make gave place to an involuntary pause of admiration. Mrs. Redmond leaned back among the pillows on the divan, a red spot glowing on her cheeks in opposition to the stones about her waist, in her hair, and at her throat, which seemed

to simultaneously put forth scarlet flames of indignation at the concluding words of the story.

The Englishman pulled at his long, fair mustache and sought for an appropriate remark, but his vocabulary, unlike Monsieur du Pré's, was not always equal to the occasion. So he merely looked down on the picture, marvelling at the length of the curling black lashes fringing the white lids of the half-closed eyes and unconsciously noting each detail of the perfect toilet, from the exquisitely dressed hair to the tip of the slipper just visible among the folds of the white lace gown.

And then, suddenly, the lashes were lifted and eyes, not blue to-night, but purple and misty as with the shadow of suffering, looked directly into his. They said something too, and Lyndhurst wondered greatly, for the eyes *appealed.* And as they gazed through the monocle, anxiously questioning the heart of the man, there flashed into the steady, quiet English eyes an answer to the appeal. It was born without his consent or volition, it is true, but none the less clear, distinct, and definite in its purpose.

Only an instant, and the black lashes again measured their curling length against the cheek, while the scarlet of the opals faded, and Lyndhurst removed his monocle and carefully polished it with his handkerchief.

"Shall we join the others?" said Mrs. Redmond, rising.

And Lyndhurst bowed quietly as he returned his handkerchief to his pocket and replaced his monocle.

XIV

THE Hon. Cecil Lyndhurst signed his name at the end of the page and breathed a sigh of satisfaction. The Metropolitan Club was comparatively empty save for a few faithful landmarks who could always be relied upon to be present at that time in the afternoon, and he glanced carelessly around, returning a casual nod or two, before picking up the many closely written sheets and reading them over carefully.

"MY DEAR BOBBY: Do you remember Egypt and our tour of duty there? Do you remember that fat old rascal of a Khedive with his unctuous voice and oily smile? I have not thought of it all for years until quite lately, but it is uppermost in my mind just now, so I naturally feel inclined to write to you. After all, barring a few mishaps, it was a jolly enough old time to look back upon. Do you remember the frantic excitement which prevailed when the jewels were lost and our suspicions that they had been sold?

"Well, Bobby, the Khedive's opals are here in Washington. I, myself, have seen them. What is more, they are the property of the wife of the Secretary of State (the First Minister of the Cabinet). Don't ask me how she got them. I don't know. But I *do* know she wears them regally and they suit her much better than they did that corpulent old heathen who sported them the first time I saw them. No, I am not mistaken. They are the real thing. The question is, how came they here? Naturally one cannot express surprise at the jewels one's hostess elects to wear, but, Bobby, *how* did it all happen? Mrs. Redmond is a stunning-looking woman, very much to the manner born. I dined there last night and she wore the opals again. I hope I did not

stare unduly, but I felt as though my eyes would bulge out of my head. The Khedive's opals. Think of it! And she wore them as calmly as though they were a string of glass beads.

"Do you remember that unfinished sketch in water-colors of a girl's head coming out of clouds that we found among poor Bertie Hertford's things in Berlin, and which I kept because I liked it? It was called 'Star of the World,' I believe; somehow I always think of that when I see Mrs. Redmond. Bobby, she is a woman who dominates you, fascinates you, interests you, even without the Khedive's opals. With them, well—you can imagine the combination.

"The diplomatic kettle is boiling hard, and I sometimes fear it may splash over and burn somebody's fingers. The Roostchook affair, of course, is at the bottom of the trouble; du Pré is here, garrulous and inquisitive as of old, and Russia has sent Valdmir on special duty; further comment on that score is unnecessary. Our chief has assigned to me the very unwelcome task of following up the Roostchook matter and getting all possible information concerning it, to be embodied in a report to the Home Office. You know him and his methods; I do not like them and may ask to be recalled.

"I have had word from the Paris Secret Service that that old fox, Colonel St. John, has been traced to America, and have pulled the wires on this side to track him to his covert. You know I never saw him but once, and yet I think I would recognize him anywhere. Well, not long ago, as I was going out to dinner one night, I thought I saw him. I gave chase, of course, but lost him in an alley, got bogged in some deserted garden, and was unpardonably late for dinner in consequence. Sometimes I feel half inclined to drop the whole thing,—man-hunting is not to my taste,—but then I think of Bertie, poor old chap, with that nasty hole in his temple—the first Hertford to besmirch the name. And of Evelyn. One does not like to see youth, hope, and happiness snatched from one's twin sister at a single fell swoop, and when I think of Evie's eyes and lips when she first heard the truth about the man she loved—why, then I am determined Colonel St. John and his daughter shall reap what they have sown, if it takes every pound I have in the world to bring it about.

"Except for diplomacy (my chosen career) I should be enjoying myself immensely. I think I like America and Americans, on the whole; they wear well. Get a detail, Bobby, and come over. Chuck Berlin and the stolid fräuleins and try the States with their Goddesses of Liberty. You will find the change inspiring. Come over, old man, and after awhile we will get a leave and steal away to the Rocky Mountains and the prairies of the far West after big game. I like this country and want to explore it further. Come and help me.

"LYNDHURST."

"P. S.—I am sending you under separate cover the sketch 'Star of the World.' Please try and find out if it is a fancy head, and, if not, the name of the model. Bobby, I am haunted by those opals.

"L."

Lyndhurst addressed an envelope to Lord Robert Tresilian, Embassy of Great Britain, Berlin, and stamped it with great care. Then he strolled to the window and was enthusiastically greeted by Monsieur du Pré, who occupied a chair commanding an unobstructed view of the street. The Metropolitan Club stands on a corner of an important thoroughfare and is admirably situated for the edification of window-gazers.

"Sit down," said the little Frenchman cordially, "sit down. I can make room. It is really entertaining, is it not?"

"What?" inquired Lyndhurst idly.

"To see the women run for the street-cars," returned the other with a chuckle; "how droll they look, to be sure, and how vexed they are when just as they think they have arrived they discover they have not."

Lyndhurst laughed, but declined the chair.

"They hear the car approaching around the corner," resumed Monsieur du Pré, with evident enjoyment of

his theme, "then they clutch their skirts tight in the back with one hand and scuttle. It is to them the last car in the world, and they strive nobly, if vainly, for it. When it passes them they look up and down the street with a vacant smile, as though to say, 'I wonder if anybody saw me?'

"Now, my dear Madame," he continued, apostrophizing a stout female strenuously endeavoring to reach the corner in time, "believe me, it is useless as well as most ungraceful. Women and cows should never run. Ah! I would I were an artist!"

The Englishman laughed again as the stout lady looked furtively about with the vapid smile described by his companion, while the car sped on without her.

"Do you really mean to say, du Pré," he inquired curiously, "that you sit for hours in that window just for this?"

"Why not?" returned the little Attaché dryly, "it is amusing, *n'est ce pas?* It is also harmless, which many amusements are not. Then, why not indulge oneself? Also, I have made a discovery; three women out of five are—what is it you say?—pigeon-toed when they run. It is not so with little girls. A point for a student of femininity to elucidate. Miss Barlow makes her *début* this afternoon, do you attend? No? Perhaps you are wise; she is a plain little girl with a poor complexion, and there is usually more apollinaris than champagne in the punch they serve."

But Monsieur du Pré found himself declaiming to space, for Lyndhurst had caught a glimpse of a brown velvet gown and a coil of red-gold hair in the drug-store opposite, and lost no time in following it.

"We are going to do something very hazardous as

soon as Mrs. Redmond can decide on the proper quantity of orris in her *sachet*," announced Miss Byrd as he greeted them with genuine pleasure and counterfeit surprise; "perhaps, if you are very good, we will take you with us."

"I am a stranger in a strange land," he returned solemnly. "I do not wish to do anything very desperate at the outset of my career."

Mrs. Redmond turned from the counter and took up her muff.

"I think you will be entirely safe, Mr. Lyndhurst," she remarked cordially. "Miss Byrd is going to take me into a haunted house quite near. The ghost is very genuine, of course, and very terrible. I shall be glad of your protection."

"It is the Octagon House," explained Isabel as they turned into Eighteenth Street. "Perhaps you have already been there?"

But Lyndhurst replied absently as he looked about him with some curiosity.

"Is this the place?" he inquired with very evident surprise as they paused before the old house. "Surely——"

He checked himself abruptly and followed his guide up the white stone steps.

"Does your blood curdle in your veins?" demanded the girl as she pushed open the door and entered the circular hall. "See, it is not even locked. No one would ever take refuge in the Octagon House at night."

"Is it quite empty?" inquired Lyndhurst after a moment's silence. "Is it used for no purpose whatever?"

"Can you not see that it is a deserted house?" re-

plied Isabel quickly. "I believe there is a janitor, or caretaker, but one never meets him. What do you think of it, Estelle?"

Mrs. Redmond glanced about.

"It is charming!" she exclaimed, looking at the curved stairway, with the broad window on the landing, and the quaint old stoves on each side of the hall. "Tell us its history, Isabel."

And Isabel told them, leading the way from room to room, until she came to the dining-room, which bore traces of recent occupancy, for cigar-ashes lay on the single deal table and a scrap of paper covered with figures had fallen to the floor.

"See," she said, pointing to the table, "how incongruous it looks. The caretaker lives on the top floor; I suppose he uses this room sometimes. There are secret doors every here and there. I used to know how to open some of them."

She pressed a panel in the wall beside her and a door slowly swung open, leading into a small, triangular space, with a large window looking out on Eighteenth Street.

"There is also a door going into the hall," she continued, opening it as she spoke and leading the way out. "Very few people know of these passages. See, here is another. It is possible to go from the hall to the attic and no one would be any the wiser."

Lyndhurst had lingered in the space off the dining-room. He was gazing as though fascinated at the frame of the window where the wood was splintered until it was rough and uneven, and at a rusty nail in the floor. At last he carefully untangled several long strands of hair from the former; they were red-gold in color and

glittered in the rays of the setting sun. Stooping hastily, he removed something from the nail; it was a strip of pale-blue gauze. The Hon. Cecil folded it carefully and put it in his card-case. Then he joined the ladies on the landing, where they stood looking through the broad window into the weedy old garden with its neglected brick wall and muddy walks.

"Back of the garden," Isabel was saying, "is an alley."

"Which runs through from F Street to New York Avenue," supplemented Mrs. Redmond.

"Why, Estelle, how do you know so much about it? One would think you had been here before."

"I have never been in the house, Isabel, but I know the neighborhood. As to the alley, it is a natural supposition that it leads from one street to another, is it not, Mr. Lyndhurst?"

"Quite correct in this case, Mrs. Redmond," he returned, watching Isabel closely. "I know, for I had occasion to go down it one stormy night not long ago. And about half-way through the wall is broken, leaving quite a gap into the garden. One might easily crawl through if one did not mind the mud on the other side."

Mrs. Redmond moved suddenly.

"Come," she said quickly, "we are wasting time. It is getting late and I really must look in at the Barlows this afternoon. Take us upstairs, Isabel, and let us see all we can."

And Isabel led the way, her head held very erect and a scarlet spot glowing on each cheek.

Up on the top floor the caretaker sat stupidly on the side of his couch and rubbed his eyes drowsily. Colonel St. John had become a very busy man of late. He

must perform the duties of watchman at the State Department, and maintain his establishment in Jackson City, as well as do certain necessary drafting work, and he found this multiplicity of duties irksome. The sound of voices below did not surprise him, as the old house was frequently visited before nightfall and he knew he was secure from interruption in his remote room. He heard the visitors pause in the upper hall and a man's voice comment on the ingenious plan of the interior.

"You must see the basement, Mr. Lyndhurst," said a woman's voice. "I think——"

But what she thought did not interest Colonel St. John. He sat stolidly upon his cot and put his hand to his head as though endeavoring to recall something. Lyndhurst. The name seemed suggestive. Suddenly an ashen pallor overspread his face and his weak lips trembled uncontrollably; the fear of the hunted shone in his eyes and his fingers twitched nervously.

Colonel St. John had remembered.

Voices and footsteps retreated and finally became inaudible, although he listened for them with strained attention. It seemed to him hours that he sat motionless upon the unsteady cot, although it was in reality but a few moments before he rose and stole noiselessly into the hall. His impulse was for instant flight and he wished to assure himself that the coast was clear. So he crept quietly to the banisters and looked over them; looked down the winding stairway, past the window on the landing, into the hall below. He also looked directly into Mrs. Redmond's blue eyes as she stood waiting for her companions and admiring the symmetrical curves of the stairway as it wound its way to the third floor.

Beads of cold perspiration appeared on Colonel St.

John's forehead, running in chilly little rivers down his neck as he clutched the banisters and stared as though fascinated into the eyes raised to his, in which the first candid surprise was gradually replaced by a shadow of puzzled uncertainty, fast changing into incredulous horror.

Summoning all his resolution to his assistance, the old man detached himself from the banisters and stumbled to his room.

"God in heaven!" he exclaimed as he again sank down on his couch, "this country is no place for me."

Isabel and her companion, returning from exploring the basement, found Mrs. Redmond on the outside steps, white-lipped and pallid.

"What is it?" said the girl quickly; "what is it, Estelle?"

"I think," replied Mrs. Redmond with a strange little laugh, "I think, Isabel, I have seen the ghost."

XV

"I HAVE seen the ghost," Mrs. Redmond repeated as she stood alone in her bedroom an hour or so later.

The woman whose book of life contains no turned-down page is doubtless to be congratulated. Her record is wonderfully smooth and legible, without a crumpled leaf or a defacing blot, and she is entitled to look upon it with complacency or display it to the world at large. She may even submit it to the eyes of her dear five hundred friends, and be quite safe in so doing, for they will not read it. It will not interest them.

If, however, this record were less fair and legible, with pages creased or blotted, and here and there one gone entirely, these same dear friends would, in all probability, scan it eagerly, condemning what they could not understand and supplying the necessary pages with avidity. Therefore it behooves one to be careful of one's manuscript. It is, on the whole, wiser to be immaculate than interesting.

Estelle Redmond wanted to be alone. Her temples throbbed painfully and she was conscious of a tightening of the muscles of her throat and a desire to lie face downward among the pillows on her couch and stay there indefinitely.

Through the half-open door she could see her maid moving about arranging the accessories of her toilet, and she knew that in a few minutes she must dress for din-

ner. Josephine entered quietly and laid the delicate gown upon the bed, touching it softly, with a true Frenchwoman's appreciation of its texture.

"In ten minutes," said Mrs. Redmond, and the maid withdrew.

Twenty minutes passed, and when she again ventured to open the door her mistress still stood beside the window gazing fixedly out into the night.

"Madame perhaps likes to watch the snow," remarked Josephine suggestively, and Mrs. Redmond acquiesced, although for the first time aware of the great, white flakes falling silently.

"Josephine," she said after a long pause, while the maid brushed out her dark hair and skilfully arranged it, "it's Christmas Eve, isn't it?"

"Yes, Madame," replied the girl wonderingly. "I sent your packages as you directed, and James will take the flowers to the hospitals himself early in the morning."

"Christmas Eve," she repeated absently; "it seems so strange."

Josephine deftly inserted a hairpin and looked critically at the result.

"Madame is a little pale," she observed thoughtfully, "just a touch of rouge perhaps—a mere soupçon?"

Mrs. Redmond anxiously studied her reflection in the mirror and willingly submitted to the suggested soupçon.

"I must look well to-night," she said quickly, "*very* well, Josephine. Are you sure my hair is just right? It seems to me too high from my forehead."

"Oh Madame, it is perfect. Do not destroy my work, I entreat you," cried Josephine in heartrending accents, and Mrs. Redmond made no further suggestions, but

joined her husband in response to his message that the carriage had been waiting for some time.

The Secretary tucked the fur robe carefully about his wife—an attention he never delegated to the footman.

"To the British Embassy," he said as he leaned back in his corner thoughtfully. The day had brought renewed anxieties and the prospect of the evening was distasteful to him. Mrs. Redmond, however, sat erect, her hands clinched under her cloak and her breath coming and going quickly between her parted lips. They sat thus, each too preoccupied to notice the unusual silence of the other, until the footman threw open the carriage door and they became aware that they were under the *porte-cochère* of the British Embassy, with the Lion and the Unicorn struggling valiantly for the Crown above them.

Once inside the big red-brick house, one realized that the Yuletide was indeed at hand, for holly and mistletoe predominated in the decorations, and the pungent odor of evergreens replaced the customary perfume of roses most acceptably.

"Really," remarked the Hon. Cecil Lyndhurst as he greeted Miss Byrd preparatory to taking her in to dinner, "I had no idea when I saw you a few hours ago that I was to have this pleasure. It's awfully jolly in Lady Desmond to send us in together—but perhaps you don't agree with me."

And Miss Byrd replied that it was very jolly indeed.

"You know a small dance follows," he continued as they entered the dining-room. "How many will you give me? Remember, it is Christmas and be generous."

"I don't feel like dancing to-night," returned the girl; "I'm tired, I think. But I will sit out the first

and fifth with you, if that will do as well. We are leaving early, because Aunt Mary wants to go to the first service to-morrow."

Lyndhurst turned and looked at her curiously; her manner was without its usual vivacity and her voice spiritless.

"Was your Christmas doll stuffed with sawdust?" he inquired, smiling, "or has the season begun to pall upon you already?"

"No," she replied with a little laugh, "it's not that. I believe it's the shadow of the Octagon House. If I were superstitious, I would think the ghost haunted me or had cast a spell over me. I wish we had never gone there. How did it affect you?"

"Well," he responded, "to be truthful, I think it made me very hungry."

Isabel shrugged her shoulders impatiently and, turning pointedly to her other neighbor, began to exchange the customary polite inanities with him, while Lyndhurst reflectively absorbed his soup in silence.

It was Lady Desmond's private opinion that although the Secretary of State might be a brilliant diplomat, he was a singularly stupid conversationalist, and she longed for dinner and her martyrdom to come to a simultaneous end.

"Everyone should have *some* small talk," she complained later when discussing the subject with her husband.

And the British Ambassador remarked that he believed the Department of State was getting a bit involved, and naturally the head thereof was preoccupied.

"Madame," said Monsieur du Pré to Mrs. Redmond later in the evening, "this is our dance."

"Pardon me," interrupted Count Valdmir quickly, "you are mistaken, du Pré; Mrs. Redmond promised me this dance. Is it not so, Madame?"

He spoke confidently, and Mrs. Redmond acquiesced with a brief word of apology to the little Frenchman, who bowed profoundly and twisted his mustache savagely as he withdrew.

"Poor du Pré," said Count Valdmir with a short laugh, "it is unkind to rob him this way, but the music is divine and the floor excellent."

"We will not dance," said Mrs. Redmond quietly, "I wish to talk to you."

"I am flattered, Madame."

They found a sofa in a small inner drawing-room, and he carefully arranged a cushion at her back.

"I wish you did not hate me so cordially," he said, with a ring of evident sincerity in his voice; "it is not my fault that you are a victim of circumstances, and I do not hate you."

The light in Count Valdmir's eyes would have surprised his diplomatic associates had they been present, but Mrs. Redmond looked beyond him through the holly-decked room with no apparent realization of his proximity. Suddenly she began to speak, her voice expressionless and mechanical.

"I went this afternoon to the Octagon House," she said slowly, "with Miss Byrd and Mr. Lyndhurst."

"Yes?" he responded interrogatively.

Count Valdmir's eyes were entirely normal now and his voice calmly interested.

"I saw—him," she continued with an obvious effort.

A moment's silence followed as he caressed his mustache without replying.

"You told me he was dead," she resumed slowly, "and I believed you. In spite of everything, I *believed* you."

"I also, Madame, believed it when I told you. I thought my authority good. I assure you——"

She made an impatient motion with her hand, as though to wave aside any protestations.

"He is, of course, in your pay," she said quietly. "You make a strong combination, Count."

He bent forward a little that he might better see her face.

"I am sorry you saw him," he said earnestly. "It was not my intention to distress you in this way. He did not know you were in America and I should never have enlightened him. I regret it extremely."

"You were always solicitous for my welfare," she remarked dryly. "I am indebted to you for many acts of thoughtfulness, Count Valdmir."

"Listen," he interrupted authoritatively, "I can force him to leave the country, and when I am through with him he shall go. Meanwhile, he will not annoy you—upon one condition."

The lace upon her corsage moved quickly and she clasped her hands with a sudden involuntary motion.

"A short time," he said quietly, "a few weeks, perhaps, and it will all be over. I shall have returned to Russia and *he* shall go also. I swear it. What are a few weeks now compared to the years which are to come?"

"The long years," she returned with a slight shiver.

He watched her keenly, his eyes narrowing strangely.

"You agree?" he said abruptly.

"On Christmas Eve," said Mrs. Redmond, as though

continuing a train of thought, "he went away and left me alone in Paris, without friends or money—*you* know."

"Yes, I know."

"I had a struggle, but I lived honestly. After awhile I met my husband; we came here and I began a new life. I was happy until I saw you, and now, on Christmas Eve, *he* too appears in Washington."

"Tell me," said Count Valdmir as she paused uncertainly, "what you would do to render your future absolutely secure and happy?"

Through the open door the voice of the British Ambassador could be heard in eloquent narration of his prowess on the hunting-field, mingled with staccato notes of feminine admiration as his companion endeavored to appear politely interested. Count Valdmir repeated his question, compelling Mrs. Redmond to raise her eyes to his by the intensity of his will.

"There is nothing I would not do," she said unwillingly, "*nothing.*"

The smouldering fire generally kept so well hidden shone in the Russian's eyes for the second time that night.

"Then you agree?" he said again, his voice modulated to careful indifference.

"I agree," she replied firmly, "God forgive me, I agree."

"Not later than Thursday," he said slowly; "you remember, I explained the reason once before. I shall expect you. On Thursday then?"

"On Thursday," she repeated decidedly.

The British Ambassador had finished his description of the hunt and passed through bound for the card-room,

stopping to exchange a word with Mrs. Redmond en route.

"Oh, you know, I really dislike whist," she replied as he invited her to join him, "and I play such a miserable game you would soon regret your rashness."

And the Ambassador laughed and passed on.

"My dance, Mrs. Redmond," said Lyndhurst, who had followed in the wake of his chief. "There is no end of holly and mistletoe in the ballroom, and everybody looks quite festive except Miss Byrd, who says she is still under the shadow of the Octagon House and can't be persuaded to waltz. I hope our expedition did not affect you the same way."

"*Au revoir, Madame,*" remarked Count Valdmir, stooping to pick up her handkerchief, "and many thanks."

Mrs. Redmond rose and moved towards the door with a subdued rustle of silken skirts and the dissemination of an odor of violets.

"By the way, Count," she said, pausing suddenly, "I will send you that translation you mentioned the other day. It is quite ready; I meant to have sent it before this."

"Madame," he replied, bowing, "you are more than kind. I shall value it as your work."

Josephine's soupçon of rouge was quite unnecessary as Mrs. Redmond turned away and entered the ballroom, where she chanced to encounter the Secretary thankfully depositing a stout dowager in a convenient corner. She willingly assented to his whispered request for an early departure, and heard the carriage door slam with a sigh of evident relief.

"You are tired, dear," he remarked, fondly putting

his arm about her, much to the detriment of the lace and chiffon on her gown.

She acquiesced quietly, and the drive home was accomplished in silence.

Contrary to her usual custom, Mrs. Redmond did not go to the library with her husband while he smoked the cigar without which he never felt the day properly concluded, and listened to her narration of its events and plans for the morrow.

Instead, she went at once to her room and, hastily getting into a dressing-gown, dismissed her sleepy maid with a kind good-night and a courteous word of acknowledgment of her services. Mrs. Redmond was uniformly considerate of her servants and correspondingly popular with them.

Josephine gone, she opened a drawer in her jewel-case and took therefrom a small leather box, shabby and worn, with the unmistakable air of having passed through various vicissitudes and suffered much in transit. An odd assortment of treasures was revealed when the cover was lifted—newspaper clippings, bits of broken jewelry, one or two letters, yellow and faded with time, and an old-fashioned daguerrotype in its velvet case.

Mrs. Redmond pressed the spring of the latter; it contained the pictures of a man and a woman set about with brilliants. The woman was young and remarkably lovely. The blue eyes which looked out of the faded case were strangely like the eyes which gazed down at them and softened as they looked until a mist hid the picture from view.

This mist was replaced by an angry sparkle as Mrs. Redmond looked from the woman to the man. Young, well-groomed, and handsome, with blue eyes also and an

engaging appearance of frankness, he seemed a fitting companion to the girl framed beside him; yet upon closer scrutiny the chin showed weakness, the thin lips both cruelty and cunning, and one felt rather sorry for her, after all.

"The ghost," said Mrs. Redmond aloud, "the ghost who is responsible for much."

She closed the box, walked over to the window, and, lifting the heavy curtain, looked out into the street, her forehead pressed against the glass.

"On Thursday," she said mechanically, "on Thursday."

The snow had ceased to fall and the city spread away into space, draped in a white mantel whose beautifying touch purified the most unsavory regions, and lent an added charm to the dignified buildings of the Government and handsome dwellings of the wealthy. An occasional carriage passed; now and then a party of holly-ladened merrymakers returned from a late expedition to the market; and not far away the boy choir of St. John's, returning from the midnight service, chanted the tidings of great joy brought by the Star in the East to the wise men of old.

The Secretary quickly dispatched his cigar and followed his wife upstairs. He joined her at the window and, putting his arm about her waist, listened to the sweet young voices grow gradually fainter until they died away in the distance.

"Peace on earth, good-will towards men," he repeated softly as he drew the curtain.

XVI

"PEACE on earth, good-will towards men."

It is the old message of the Christmas-tide repeated annually for many centuries, yet always welcomed and rejoiced in.

"Peace on earth."

God's earth to-day, not man's, and therefore peaceful indeed. The very atmosphere is different from yesterday and unlike what may be expected to-morrow; one should drink deeply thereof, for it is soon adulterated.

"Good-will towards men."

For this one day—good-will towards men. Three hundred and sixty-four days for envy, hatred, and malice; just one for charity. Therefore make the most of it; forgive, and, if possible, forget.

"Good-will towards men."

Colonel St. John went to the window of his Jackson City residence, breathed on the frosty pane, rubbed it clear with his coat-sleeve, and looked out. The Potomac was frozen almost solid and the Long Bridge, outlined in snow and fringed with icicles, glittered in the sunshine, while above the snow-draped roofs and steeples the Washington Monument merged its stately shaft into the horizon.

Colonel St. John had an eye for the beautiful and admired the picture even while he cursed his ill-luck,

for destiny obliged him to walk across that glistening bridge, and it was very slippery.

The slothfulness of Jackson City by daylight bears but little resemblance to its activity by night, and but few pedestrians were abroad to wish Colonel St. John a Merry Christmas as he closed and locked his front door, turned up the collar of his coat, and sallied forth. One small voice did indeed venture to salute him with the " Chris'mas gif' " of the South, and he flung a silver dollar at the little darky, who sprang gleefully to pick it up, astonished at the munificence of the gift. Colonel St. John felt warmer and more cheerful as he parted with the coin; he almost believed himself a well-disposed, charitable fellow, after all, but a victim of circumstances.

It was nearly noon when he ascended the steps of the Octagon House and pushed open the front door, with a furtive look up and down the street, as though fearing someone would question his right of entrance. The cheerless exterior of the old red-brick structure presented a marked contrast to the neighboring residences, with wreaths of holly in their windows and the indefinable air of festivity inseparable from the season.

The Octagon House was not decked with holly, nor were any evidences of good-will apparent to the casual observer. Peaceful indeed it might be considered, if by peace is understood the pall of silence which envelops long-unused rooms, where the fall of a footstep reverberates with hollow distinctness and the sound of a voice awakens unexpected and unwelcome echoes, which die away reluctantly, as though unwilling to become even an integral portion of the oppressively obtrusive space.

Colonel St. John shivered as he mounted the winding

staircase and hastened towards the room at the top of the house where he had placed a cot and a few articles of furniture, among them an oil-stove whose warmth he felt would be most acceptable. He had an engagement that morning which admitted of no postponement, also a bit of unfinished work which must be completed where he felt secure from interruption, so he lighted his stove and, drawing the small table close to it, bent anxiously over the sheet of tracing-paper with its unfinished outlines and marginal notes which awaited his attention.

He worked carefully for some minutes, then dropped his pen and pushed back his chair impatiently. The oil-stove smoked and filled the atmosphere with its pungent and unpleasant odor, but Colonel St. John sat absorbed in thought, unconscious of his surroundings and oblivious of the fleeting moments. After a while he drew from his pocket a shabby leather case and studied its contents with interest. It contained two likenesses—one a woman in the full glory of her young beauty, the other a laughing baby. Colonel St. John glanced casually at the woman, but scrutinized the baby closely.

"The wife of the Secretary of State," he ejaculated aloud, "his *wife*."

Laying the open case upon the table at his side, he resumed his pen while his lips parted in a slow, sinister smile and his close-set eyes narrowed until they seemed like mere slits.

Meanwhile downstairs the front door swung slowly open; it was not essential to be provided with a key in order to enter the Octagon House. Indeed, its lock had long ago refused to work and no one had considered it necessary to repair it.

The visitor advanced to the rear of the hall with the manner of one familiar with his surroundings, and, passing through a door at the left, began his ascent to the top by means of a back stairway so constructed as to be entirely separate and apart from the rest of the house. He moved quietly, picking his way with care and occasionally pausing to brush a bit of dust or cobweb from his coat, for the spiders had long been busy on the old back stairs.

And again the front door opened and shut, its creaking hinges complaining fretfully of overwork.

Out in the garden the snow lay smooth and spotless, covering even the broken wall with its kindly mantle of purity. Had anyone glanced from the large window on the landing, they might have seen a woman force her way through the gap and over the unsteady pile of bricks at its base. She moved quickly, holding her long, dark cloak closely about her and advancing with the steady determination which permits not even a glance to the right or the left lest progress may thereby be retarded.

The rusty latch of the back door yielded reluctantly. to her touch as she slipped quietly inside and looked about. She was quite alone.

The spiders on the back stairs told no tales of the disturber of their peace who had so recently passed that way, and the stairs themselves looked dark and uninviting, so she hesitated a moment, then went into the front hall, stopping now and then to listen and drawing her cloak closer, as though to keep the penetrating chill of the place from reaching her heart.

At the foot of the stairs she paused, her hand on the rail. Was that a noise?

"Only a mouse in the wall," she murmured as she began the ascent.

Colonel St. John, bending over the little table, was conscious of a draught. A blast of cold air struck the back of his neck unpleasantly, and with a muttered malediction on the untrustworthy latch of the door he rose to investigate.

A woman stood on the threshold, tall and slender, with both hands raised to untie the dark veil which obscured her face. The hands shook slightly and the knot proved obstinate, but at last the veil was removed and she looked full at the old man, who stared incredulously in return, his jaw dropping and his lips twitching uncontrollably.

"Estelle?" he ejaculated at last, "Estelle?"

"Yes," she replied slowly, "Estelle."

"You are alone?" he whispered apprehensively, after several ineffectual efforts to speak.

"Quite alone," she returned coldly. "I am in your power—not you in mine."

Colonel St. John's countenance resumed its normal expression, and he placed a chair for his guest with a suggestion of the courtly manner for which he had once been famous.

"So you recognized me yesterday?" he remarked easily, with the casual manner of one desirous of making conversation.

She nodded absently.

"It was most kind in you to look me up so soon," he continued cordially; "I confess, I did not expect it."

She opened her bag and produced a blank check, which she folded unconsciously into little squares.

"How much will you take to leave the country?" she inquired curtly.

Colonel St. John adjusted the wick of his oil-stove carefully and eyed the bit of pink paper with genuine admiration.

"The world has gone well with you, my dear," he remarked thoughtfully. "I rejoice in your good fortune. Perhaps some reflected glory may fall on me, though as yet I have not profited——"

A board in the hall without creaked suddenly and he crossed quickly to the door and opened it. The passage was quite empty, and Colonel St. John shrugged his shoulders sceptically as he returned to his visitor.

"I am expecting Valdmir," he remarked casually. "I thought he might perhaps have arrived."

Estelle Redmond had risen, and as the old man advanced lifted her eyes to his—eyes no longer blue and cold with a spark of anger in them, but purple and softened by a mist of tears.

"Father," she whispered involuntarily, "*father.*"

His brow contracted suddenly and he sank into the chair beside the table, while she bent over him, her hand upon his shoulder and a loose tendril of her hair brushing his wrinkled cheek.

"Father," she repeated gently, "you'll go away, won't you?

"I have been so happy," she continued, after waiting a moment for a reply. "I'm married, had you heard? I never met an honorable man before—I don't think I even knew the word until my husband introduced me to it. I never realized the way good men looked at things, —things *we* did, you know,—and I would rather die than have him hear about them."

Somewhere outside a sleigh passed, the sound of its jingling bells forcing itself obtrusively into the quiet room.

As she again paused for a reply she noticed the open case upon the table, with its rubbed and faded cover and the two faces, the woman and the baby. Estelle carefully brushed a speck of dust from the face of the woman.

"For her sake," she said softly, "let me be happy—for her sake, father."

Colonel St. John raised his head and looked beyond his daughter; a quiet movement of the doorknob had arrested his attention, and his eyes focussed anxiously upon it. Very slowly the door opened, a little way only, but far enough for the old man to see distinctly the finger placed on the lips of the listening face—a finger imperatively commanding silence, even as the eyes which met his managed to convey a threat. Colonel St. John made an effort to speak, and shook off the little hand which lay on his as though fearing it might convey some subtle and undue influence.

"You'll go away," said the soft voice close to his ear; "every month I'll send you money, and you can live somewhere quietly and honestly. My life's happiness is at stake—you understand, don't you?"

Yes, he understood. Colonel St. John was not lacking in intelligence and fully appreciated the situation. It seemed to him to contain a surprising number of possibilities, and he could not help wishing he had been allowed to deal with it alone and unobserved. As it was, however, the door moved ever so little and he felt it was incumbent upon him to speak.

"Was it quite prudent in you to come here this

morning?" he inquired with the impersonal manner of a wholly disinterested observer.

And his daughter straightened herself abruptly with a disappointed sigh.

"I might have known," she said bitterly, "I might have known."

The folded check fell upon the floor and he stooped furtively to pick it up.

"It's not signed," he whispered eagerly, coming closer. "Estelle, you've forgotten to sign it, my—my dear."

The door was wide open now, but the whole attention of the old man was concentrated upon the bit of creased pink paper.

"Here's a pen," he continued, turning to the table; "you like a stub, I know. You see, I still remember your tastes, my dear—a stub pen and very black ink."

He smoothed out the check carefully and dipped the pen in the ink.

"Now," he exclaimed persuasively, "now, my dear child."

But the hand which closed upon the pen was larger than Colonel St. John expected, and he turned swiftly, his assured manner giving way to a deprecating smile as Count Valdmir tore the check in bits and contemptuously tossed aside the fragments.

"So!" said that gentleman, "is the greed for money so great you chose to ignore the fact I could both see and hear?"

"A family matter, Count," the Colonel stammered uneasily, "a little gift from my daughter—nothing more."

Mrs. Redmond had crossed the room and stood lean-

ing her forehead against the dusty pane of the closed window, whose broken shutter admitted little rays of light, which seemed mere suggestions of the cheerful world without in its holiday array. The Russian watched her a moment in silence, then followed her quietly.

"Had you not better go home?" he suggested gently. "Believe me, it was a mistake to come here. You should have trusted me. I did not intend he should annoy you, except——"

"Well?" she said as he paused uncertainly, "except?"

"Except as a last resort," he returned slowly. "You understand?"

She did not reply, and the old man behind them bent sharply forward, almost losing his balance in his anxiety to hear the whispered words.

"It is not easy to outwit me," continued Count Valdmir after a moment's silence, "nor is it safe to defy me. I set a price upon your happiness, and it remains with you to pay. Is it worth the price?"

Mrs. Redmond slowly turned and faced the two men. The shadows beneath her eyes showed dark and distinct, in marked contrast to the pallor of her cheeks, which seemed to have suddenly lost their rounded contour and become chalk-like and hollow. Ignoring the Russian at her side, she addressed Colonel St. John, who involuntarily bent his gaze upon the floor and shuffled his feet uneasily, after the manner of one who would fain escape an ordeal.

"I came here this morning," she said, "intending to bribe you to leave the country, but when I saw you I remembered you were my father and, after all, the tie

of blood is strong. I appealed to you for my mother's sake, for I always cherished the thought you must once have loved her. I see, however, I was wrong."

"Oh," she continued, her voice breaking uncontrollably, "isn't it enough to have ruined your own life? Is it necessary——"

"Hush," interrupted Count Valdmir imperatively.

He stepped softly into the hall and listened intently. Returning after a moment's breathless silence, he carefully closed the door and attempted to turn the key.

"It won't lock," said the old man tremulously, "it won't lock."

"Be silent," commanded Count Valdmir in a sharp whisper.

The sound of footsteps was distinctly audible upon the bare boards of the floor below—wandering footsteps apparently, with no especial destination in view, for they ceased entirely now and then as though undecided whether to retreat or advance, and finally could be heard descending the stairs with many pauses and an evident inclination to return to the upper regions.

Count Valdmir nodded towards a partly open door at his left.

"Does that room communicate with the hall?" he inquired abruptly.

Colonel St. John shook his head.

"Its only outlet is through here," he replied.

The footsteps ceased for a moment, then recommenced, this time again in the ascendant.

"Quick!" said the Russian, touching Mrs. Redmond on the shoulder and pointing to the inner room. As she hesitated a moment, looking distrustfully at the faces of the two men, he leaned forward and whispered a single

word. Mrs. Redmond lingered no longer. With an apprehensive glance towards the hall she hastened into the bare little inner room and heard the click of the latch as the door closed after her.

With a quick revulsion of feeling she put out her hand to again open the door, but discovered only the blank surface presented by the inside of an ordinary closet door. There was no knob, and the latch was on the other side.

Colonel St. John smiled as he heard the snap of the latch. In obedience to a gesture of his companion, however, he made no remark, but turned a strained attention to the footsteps, which drew nearer, passed the door, paused on the upper landing, repassed, and again descended the stairs, briskly now, as one having a definite purpose in view.

As the sound became gradually fainter Count Valdmir cautiously reconnoitred. Returning after an absence of some minutes, he beckoned the old man to follow him, and together they descended the stairs until they reached the large window on the first landing.

"Look," he said, indicating the garden below.

And Colonel St. John looked. He saw an expanse of snow, white and unbroken, save where someone had recently passed from the gap in the wall to the old back door. He saw also a man walking towards the wall, moving slowly with bent head, as though deep in thought.

"Lyndhurst," said the Russian briefly.

The old man made an inarticulate sound, somewhere between a gasp and a snarl, and shrank back against the baluster.

"Do you realize what he is doing?"

Colonel St. John shook his head, speech having for the time deserted him.

"He is following your daughter's footprints in the snow."

"Devil take the women," muttered Colonel St. John, suddenly recovering the use of his tongue, "they always make complications."

He wiped his moist brow with his handkerchief and vainly endeavored to control the shaking of his hand, while his companion watched him coolly, a faint smile curving his lips and a contemptuous expression in his half-closed eyes.

"America is getting hot, eh, Colonel?" he remarked quietly; "it behooves you to finish my work and vanish."

"Well," he resumed, after waiting in vain for a reply, "there is not much more to do. The crisis, Colonel, is approaching. Do you go on duty as watchman to-day? Good. The Secretary has in his possession the synopsis of the President's policy in regard to the Roostchook matter. I desire the paper in *my* possession within the next few days. It is in his private desk and no doubt locked, but those are simple obstacles to an expert like yourself."

"Suppose," said the old man slowly, "suppose, Count, I cannot find it. What then?"

"Why dwell on unpleasant subjects, Colonel? The details would be painful.

"One thing more," he continued, and Colonel St. John gazed fixedly at the double row of large and small footprints in the snow with the manner of one who expects to take to his heels at any moment. As Count Valdmir paused impressively, however, he turned his

head and with an obvious effort recalled his wandering attention.

"Yes?" he said anxiously.

The Russian came closer and laid his hand on the old man's shoulder, his fingers fastening with a grip as of steel.

"You are not to annoy *her*," he said, "I will not have it. No extorting money, no blackmail——"

"Count Valdmir perhaps prefers to keep such privileges for himself," returned the other with a sneer.

The fingers on his shoulder tightened until he winced involuntarily.

"Sometimes," said Count Valdmir through his teeth, "I wonder I can soil my hands with a tool like you."

The usual dull apathy of Colonel St. John's eyes was replaced by a gleam of hatred, but he made no reply and his companion curtly continued:

"You will do my work, and when I am through with you leave the country. You will not attempt to see her again or to communicate with her. It is wise to accede to my terms, Colonel; Lyndhurst and the police are ever ready, and I should have no scruples on your behalf. You shall not annoy her—do you understand?"

Colonel St. John shook himself free of the restraining hand.

"If I'm not to see her again," he said sullenly, "who is to let her out of that room?"

* * * * * * *

Estelle Redmond, alone in the little room, heard the two men go downstairs and fully realized her position. Sinking upon the floor, she rested her head upon the dusty window-ledge and tried to think. Was it all

coming to an end? Was this to be the outcome of the marriage which had opened to her a new life, made beautiful by the sheltering care of a great and unselfish love? Must her past life be laid bare before her husband's eyes? Must he know of a child who had had no childhood? Of a girl taught to value the beauty with which she was endowed because of the power that accompanied it—a girl without a girlhood—a girl familiar with the seamy side of life?

Must he know of her father's vocation? Of hasty flights from city to city when the police became troublesome? Was it necessary he should hear the story of Berlin? Of Bertie Hertford with his ingenuous boyish face and frank confidence in mankind in general? Bertie Hertford, who lost his all over the green baize card tables in her father's salon and who, under the influence of the moon and her own blue eyes, confided the state secret of his mission to Berlin, which she in turn retailed to her father, who sold it to the Russian Government for much gold?

Estelle St. John at eighteen had not understood why she was delegated to extract this information and had exulted in her ability to obtain it. Estelle Redmond at twenty-eight understood fully, and felt to the utmost the unavailing bitterness of regret.

The tragic death of Hertford, with the note addressed to herself, had been a terrible awakening. She had carried it to her father with blanched cheeks and tear-dimmed, wondering eyes. What did it mean? And Colonel St. John had laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear," he had said indifferently, "all young men are fools. Your eyes and complexion, and, above

all, your ingenuous manner, constitute my best stock in trade."

Estelle remembered it all with sickening distinctness as she pressed her white forehead against the dusty window-sill:

The headlines in the papers, the slow awakening to the meaning of her life, the arrival of Lyndhurst in Berlin with his declared intention of investigation and punishment, and their own hasty departure at night for Paris.

She remembered her life in Paris, deserted by her father, almost penniless and quite desperate. The two years of painful effort to live by honest labor, and then the chance meeting with her husband, and his generous answer to her reluctant offer to tell him her history.

"If it hurts you to tell me, sweetheart, don't do it. Forget everything. Nothing matters but dishonor, and you could not look at me with those true blue eyes if all was not well. Let us be happy in each other."

"*Nothing matters but dishonor.*" The words rang in her ears.

Must she lose everything rather than make one bold stroke for happiness? Must she cause misery to him as well as herself from weakness at a crucial moment?

The latch of the door moved and she sprang quickly to her feet.

"It is safe for you to go, Madame," said Count Valdmir, standing aside that she might pass out. "Your father will not cause you further trouble; it will not be necessary for you to consider him at all."

"Thank you," she said quietly, "you are very good, Count."

He stooped to recover her veil, which had fallen to the

floor, and held the hand extended to receive it somewhat longer than necessary.

"It is your happiness I have at heart," he whispered softly, "your happiness and mine, Estelle.

"Were you afraid," he continued breathlessly, "afraid, shut in that empty room alone?"

Mrs. Redmond slowly withdrew her hand.

"I was not afraid," she said with a sudden lowering of her black lashes, "because—I knew you would not forget me."

She moved towards the door, but paused on the threshold and looked back.

"This house is strangely lonely," she remarked with a shiver, "will you not see me safely to the street, Count Valdmir?"

XVII

"HAVE you noticed," inquired Mrs. Colson genially, addressing her household assembled at the evening repast, the day after Christmas, "how changed Mr. Leigh is? Scarcely a word to say for himself and out till all hours of the night—or morning, rather. No wonder he looks thin and worn. I think you'll find that currant jelly good, Miss Jackson, I put it up myself."

"You *know* I prefer mint sauce with roast lamb, Mrs. Colson," returned Miss Jackson, mildly reproachful, repudiating the jelly; "as to Mr. Leigh, well, since you mention it, I will admit that he is changed, and not for the better."

"Late hours," suggested an old gentleman with a fierce gray mustache, "late hours and hard work perhaps. Burning the candle at both ends, like all young fellows."

"Young men will be young men, General," returned the White House Baby with a wan smile. "Would you kindly pass the Chili sauce? Thank you so much."

"He used to be so merry," continued Mrs. Colson, shaking her head regretfully; "always a cheerful word or a joke even for the servants, and I have often heard him whistling and singing in his room while he was dressing, and now——"

"And now," said the White House Baby acidly,

" when he comes home he walks to and fro over my head until I get so nervous I can't sleep. I really think, Mrs. Colson, you might speak to him about it. I must have my rest, you know."

" It's love," said the old gentleman, gallantly filling Miss Jackson's glass, " that is what's the matter with him. A pair of bright eyes, ladies, plays the devil with a man, young or old."

" Oh General!" exclaimed the ladies in coquettish chorus.

" Mr. Marks also," remarked Miss Jackson thoughtfully, " is not the man he once was."

" No," agreed Mrs. Colson regretfully, " that is true, Miss Jackson. He keeps very late hours too. And he used to be so—well, so circumspect, you know."

The old gentleman burst into a shout of gruff laughter.

" My dear Madam," he said, " you have employed the right word. Whatever that young man may do, I'll wager he does it in a circumspect manner."

" Oh General," again chorussed the ladies in faint expostulation.

" Do you see Mrs. Colson's new white silk waist?" whispered the White House Baby to Miss Jackson under cover of a sudden buzz of conversation; " that is the second this winter. And it is trimmed with Persian bands. Did you ever hear of such extravagance?"

" I'll wager her shoes don't keep out the wet," returned Miss Jackson in the same tone, adding aloud, " we were just admiring your bodice, Mrs. Colson. How very becoming it is."

And meanwhile up in his room David Leigh sat before his writing-desk and gazed at a miscellaneous collection of what appeared to be odds and ends destined for the

scrap-basket. The fact that dinner was in progress below disturbed his serenity not at all, for he had no intention of presenting himself at the festive board. There were times when the society of his fellow-boarders did not appeal to his sense of duty. Upon the floor beside him was a copy of the evening paper open at the society column; it had laid there for the past hour and the page was creased and wrinkled as if crushed by an impatient hand. Now and then he lifted an article from the little heap before him and held it judicially, as though weighing its value.

"I will keep one thing," he said, aloud, "*one*. Which shall it be?"

He carefully put aside several little scented notes; a handkerchief with its dainty embroidered monogram; two or three faded flowers and a long white glove. It was not a very large collection, but a choice seemed difficult.

He smoothed out the handkerchief with a lingering touch, then folded it carefully, placed it in the drawer of the desk, and took up the glove. There is something wonderfully human about an empty glove which has shaped itself to a hand; it retains the personality of its owner in a manner possible to few inanimate objects; it also seems to appeal mutely for the absent, and to continually beckon wandering memory back into the sunshine or shadow of the past. David Leigh held the white glove until his fingers instinctively closed over it, as though the soft suede covered a still softer hand of flesh and blood.

"I will keep this," he said, rousing himself abruptly and gathering together the notes and bits of brown flowers. There were very few, to be sure, but they made

quite a little pile as he laid them away in a drawer of the desk.

"David, my boy," he continued meditatively, "you have been a fool—yes, a fool. Are you a child that you should cry for the moon? Go to work; there's plenty to do. Brace up now and write your note; take your medicine like a little man."

The result of this exhortation was the following epistle, written with great care upon his best stationery, after many sheets had been begun and flung impatiently aside:

"MY DEAR MISS BYRD: I have just been reading the *Star* and hasten to offer my hearty congratulations and very best wishes. What a lucky man Mr. Rivers is, to be sure! I wonder how many fellows in Washington are envying him to-night. Shall I see you at Mrs. Redmond's dinner on Tuesday? I want to present my congratulations in person and, incidentally, to return the handkerchief you lost at the Stones' cotillion and which I was fortunate enough to find.

"Wishing you every possible happiness, believe me

"Sincerely yours,

"DAVID GRAHAM LEIGH."

David looked at his signature with some admiration as he laid aside the blotter. It was only on state occasions that he wrote it out in full and brought the end of the last letter around beneath the whole name in an imposing flourish. He addressed an envelope and stamped it with the careful attention to detail which had marked the transcribing of the note, scrupulously wiping his pen and returning it to its appointed place.

"Here endeth the first lesson," he remarked as he took up his overcoat and opened the door.

"There he goes," remarked Miss Jackson as the front

door slammed. "Doesn't he even tell you when he dines out, Mrs. Colson?"

Mrs. Colson smiled a patient and a long-suffering smile.

"My dear Miss Jackson," she returned with the air of a martyr, "I'm accustomed to being slighted and neglected. What does a little more or less matter?"

"But a certain amount of courtesy is due *every* lady from a man," remarked the White House Baby, with the manner of including even an inferior in her large-mindedness on such subjects.

"My dear Mrs. Rowen," replied Mrs. Colson, delicately crooking her little finger as she helped herself to potatoes, "I have long been a stranger to the prerogatives of a lady; and yet I remember the time when I scarcely knew how to sew on a button or tie my own shoe."

David, meanwhile, unconscious of his deterioration, posted his letter and walked on, ignoring the fact that he had not dined and had lunched very lightly. When a man is oblivious to the claims of the central portion of his anatomy it is a tolerably sure sign he has received a hard hit from some source, and is as yet stunned from the blow.

And, in fact, when David, in looking over the evening paper, had glanced casually at the social news, and read the bald fact that Senator Byrd announced the engagement of his daughter Isabel to the Hon. Charles Rivers, Member of Congress from Virginia, he felt very much as he had done as a boy when the ball he expected to catch hit him on the nose.

He had quite lately begun to analyze his sentiments towards that young lady and had come to a very definite

conclusion regarding her. There had been unexpected meetings with strictly informal chats, jolly little suppers at Senator Byrd's after the theatre, an occasional walk and talk in the winter's twilight; and also there was something else: a rainy Sunday afternoon when there were no other callers, a chance word, a quick flush overspreading a flower-like face, a sudden lowering of dark lashes, then the inevitable interruption, and he had taken his leave with throbbing pulses and buoyant step, for he thought she understood. And now the paragraph in the *Evening Star*. He repeated it to himself, word for word, as he turned into Pennsylvania Avenue, with its glare of light and noise of passing cars, whose wheels took up and repeated the refrain, " the engagement of his daughter Isabel—his daughter Isabel—his daughter——"

Our first castles in the air are very lofty and imposing structures; they spring up suddenly, complete and beautiful, with no faulty architecture nor blemishes in material to mar the pleasure of their contemplation; they also seem easy of access and entirely possible of achievement. As a rule, they fade slowly, being in time replaced by smaller but more substantial edifices; they disappear quietly, growing daily less distinct, even as the towering roofs and steeples of a large city are finally merged into the horizon when viewed from an outgoing steamer; and this effacement is so gradual we scarcely realize they have vanished forever.

Sometimes, however, these castles are incontinently demolished while yet newly built and fondly cherished; they fall about our heads with a crashing of walls and rattling of stones deafening and benumbing in effect; and they leave no foundations on which they may be re-

constructed. Generally when this happens we are at first stunned and inclined to believe ourselves crushed and hopelessly crippled by the fall. After awhile, however, we push aside the *débris* and look about; we find, to our surprise, that the sun still shines and the earth revolves as usual; and then, all at once, we realize we must be up and doing again, for we must work if we would live, and there are still things in life to interest us after all.

David, as he walked briskly down the street, was conscious of a decided sensation of resentment and a desire to be alone. He felt at odds with the world generally, and a fleeting glimpse of Mr. Rivers rolling rapidly along in a hansom, snug and comfortable, was scarcely soothing under the circumstances. He had intended dropping in at one of the theatres and afterwards joining a party of young men at the Alibi Club, but he decided to go instead to the Department and work off some arrears of correspondence. It is odd how paramount duty can become when one is disinclined for pleasure.

"Working overtime?" inquired the watchman with a nod of recognition as David paused to get the key of his office.

"You'll have to walk up," he continued garrulously, selecting the key from the rack beside him, "the elevators don't run at night."

The great building, which during the day was a veritable hive of industry, teeming with humanity and humming with many voices, mingled with the ceaseless click of the typewriter, was quiet and deserted enough at night. The long corridors, dimly illuminated by an occasional electric light at regular intervals, looked

ghostly and unreal as they stretched away into space, and his footsteps upon the marble floor reverberated with a hollow, metallic ring he had not noticed during the day.

David unlocked the door of the Secretary's office and passed through it into the little room adjoining, where his own desk was situated. The pile of unanswered letters he had left a few hours previously confronted him as he turned on the electric light. He looked them over reflectively, and, seizing a pad and pencil, scrawled answers to three or four, and pushed them aside to be copied in the morning. Then he paused deliberately and glanced into the next room with its deserted desk and vacant chairs.

The personality of the Secretary clung to this room, even during his absence. The neat rows of papers waiting decision, carefully placed in their proper order of importance, seemed to lie in more decorous piles than most correspondence, as though in deference to the hand which laid them there, and the swivel-chair with its covering of brown leather had a quiet dignity of its own, acquired perhaps from daily contact with its occupant. David stood on the threshold and looked at the bookcase, with its simply bound volumes of laws and regulations; at the map of the world on the wall beside it, with the different countries defined by irregular lines of various colors; and at the desk in the centre, with its vacant chair and closed drawers. He had drawn a bunch of keys from his pocket and fingered them doubtfully, absently selecting one and holding it uncertainly in his hand. He stood thus for some minutes, then moved impatiently.

"Why not now as well as any time?" he said aloud,

and, extinguishing his light, passed into the Secretary's private office and shut the door.

Outside the door the clock ticked steadily, its black hands travelling slowly around its white face and its pendulum moving monotonously back and forth with the dignified and precise regularity becoming a timepiece in the Department of State.

And after the larger hand had several times performed its circuit the door opened and the private secretary stepped out. He walked down the corridor with lagging step and drooping figure, as though exhausted mentally and physically, and in his hand he carried a long, sealed envelope.

XVIII

A NOTICEABLE languor pervaded the Department of State. Visitors were few and unimportant; clerks yawned and leisurely dispatched the routine work; messengers nodded in their chairs with even more than their usual abandon; and, indeed, over the entire south wing of the great stone building hovered a mantle of inertia.

The Secretary was at Cabinet meeting. A telephone message had come from the White House that he wished to speak with his private secretary, and the Chief Clerk had replied that Mr. Leigh had not reached the Department.

The winter sun shone brightly into the Secretary's office and into the little room adjoining, with the swivel-chair pushed back as though hastily vacated and a pencil lying upon the blotter as if idle for a moment, to be sure, but ready to be up and doing at any instant.

Again the telephone rang and again the Chief Clerk repeated his statement that Mr. Leigh had not yet arrived.

So the morning dragged slowly on until the return of the Secretary created some little diversion, for the messengers rose as he passed and in so doing almost awoke.

Mr. Redmond was accompanied by Senator Byrd and Mr. Rivers. They went at once to his private office, and

almost immediately the imperative sound of a bell disturbed the serenity of the surrounding atmosphere.

"Go at once," said the Secretary to the messenger who responded, "to Mr. Leigh's rooms. Say that I wish to see him on important business. If he is indisposed, I will not detain him long, but the matter is urgent. Make haste!"

The man withdrew, and Mr. Redmond turned to his companions. He stood before his desk; the upper right-hand drawer was open and its contents spread upon the blotter.

"It is gone," he said blankly, "gone."

The little key in the open drawer twinkled and glittered in the sunlight as brightly as it had glistened once before when the drawer was shut and locked.

"Ask me," it said, "ask *me*."

But nobody noticed it at all, and after a while even the sun went under a cloud and forgot all about it.

"I put it in here," said Mr. Redmond slowly, "with my own hands. You saw me, Byrd."

Senator Byrd nodded.

"I don't think I entirely understand," remarked Mr. Rivers, who had met the other two at the entrance to the elevator. "What is lost?"

"The President," said the Secretary quietly, "gave me a synopsis of his policy in regard to the Roostchook trouble just before he went South. I did not agree with him and delayed action until he returned. Meanwhile, I temporized, hoping the lost papers might be found.

"I brought the paper the President gave me over here," he resumed after a moment's silence, "and talked the matter over with Senator Byrd. No one else

knew of the existence of such a document and I wished to keep it secret.

"To-day I again discussed the question with the President and he agreed reluctantly to modify his policy in some essential features. He wishes the paper returned to him for revision. It is not here."

Mr. Rivers and Senator Byrd exchanged a quick glance, and the latter approached the Secretary and laid his hand on his shoulder, remarking quietly that doubtless it was only mislaid and would in time appear.

Mr. Redmond turned suddenly and faced his companions. He was evidently deeply excited and breathed heavily as he shook off the consoling hand impatiently.

"My God, man," he said almost angrily, "don't you understand that there is a spy in the Department?"

Mr. Rivers thrust his hands in his pockets and walked to the window looking out over the Potomac with thoughtful eyes and lips puckered slightly, as though about to whistle. The Member of Congress was thinking.

Senator Byrd absently collected the scattered papers and replaced them in the drawer. His face was very grave, and he glanced from time to time at the little inner room with apparent anxiety. Mr. Rivers, turning slightly, followed the direction of his glance and walked at once to the door.

"Who occupies this room?" he inquired suddenly.

"My private secretary, Mr. Leigh," replied Mr. Redmond mechanically.

Again the Senator and Member of Congress exchanged a glance as the Secretary sank into his chair and unconsciously tapped the arm with his fingers.

"Byrd," he said thoughtfully, "I wonder——"

He checked himself abruptly and touched his bell.

"I wish to see Harris," he said when it was answered.

And the man replied that Harris had been sent for Mr. Leigh and had not yet returned.

"I have every confidence in Mr. Leigh," said the Secretary, addressing Mr. Rivers almost belligerently, "every confidence."

"Yes," replied the Member of Congress smoothly, "of course."

He returned to the window and resumed his contemplation of the landscape, while his companions watched the door with no effort to conceal their impatience, and the silence remained unbroken save for the voices and footsteps of visitors passing through the corridor without.

Upon the wall hung the likeness of a former Secretary, now no longer burdened by affairs of state. He looked serenely down upon his successor and almost seemed to shrug his shoulders disdainfully, as though repudiating any connection with Departmental responsibilities.

There was a slight stir in the corridor and Harris returned, breathless from rapid walking.

"Well?" said the Secretary sharply, "well?"

"Mr. Leigh was not at home, sir," replied the man.

"Not at home?"

"No, sir. He went out at dinner-time last night and did not return. They do not know where he is."

Harris waited uncertainly, hat in hand.

"Is there anything more, sir?" he inquired deferentially.

"Nothing more, Harris. You can go."

The Secretary's face had grown old and gray and

the hand which turned the shining key in the desk drawer shook slightly.

"I lock the stable door, you see," he said grimly as the other men approached him, "after the horse is stolen."

Mr. Rivers looked significantly at the little inner room with its unmistakable traces of recent occupancy.

"The inference," he said, "is obvious."

"I have every confidence in Mr. Leigh," said the Secretary, turning involuntarily to Senator Byrd.

But the Senator shook his head gravely.

"I am afraid," he said slowly, "that your confidence was misplaced. Mr. Leigh knew of the existence of that paper; he also knew where it was. When we discussed the matter he was in that little room. You remember he came through the door and reminded you of its being Diplomatic Day, don't you?"

"Yes," said Mr. Redmond unwillingly, "yes, I remember."

"In short," remarked Mr. Rivers briskly, "the paper is gone and Leigh is missing. It only goes to prove the theory I have had all along."

"You are wrong," said Mr. Redmond emphatically, "*wrong*. No man—— What is it, Harris? I do not wish to be disturbed."

"I am sorry, sir," he replied, "but the private secretary of the President is waiting and says his business is important."

"Very well, I will see him."

Senator Byrd and Mr. Rivers started to retire, but the Secretary detained them with an imperative motion of his hand.

"Well, Mr. Lane," he said, turning with his cus-

tomary quiet self-possession to greet the young man who now entered, "what can I do for you?"

"The President wishes his synopsis on the Roostchook matter, Mr. Secretary," replied Mr. Lane, declining the proffered chair, "he intends to take the subject up at once."

Mr. Redmond touched his bell.

"My coat and hat, Harris," he said quietly. "I will return with you to the White House, Mr. Lane. I wish to see the President."

Senator Byrd accepted a cigar tendered him by the Member of Congress as the door closed on the Secretary and the smaller, more erect figure of the younger man.

"It is a bad business," he remarked as he struck a match.

"Yes," replied his companion indifferently, "it looks as though there might be the devil to pay before we get through with it."

"I wonder," said the Senator, pausing at the door of the little room, "I wonder where he is?"

"And I," returned the Member of Congress, "wonder who bought him."

The swivel-chair looked as if it knew all about it but wouldn't tell for the world, and the pencil lay upon the blotter innocent enough to all appearance, yet the lead was worn blunt and had a weary air, as though it could a tale impart if it chose to do so. The Senator looked at his watch.

"Past lunch time," he exclaimed, "and I promised to be at home to-day. Come with me, Rivers, and help me make my peace with Isabel."

But the Member of Congress had another engagement, so the two men separated, while the sun again looked in

on the empty office where the picture of the bygone and forgotten Secretary gazed loftily at the brown leather chair of his successor from his vantage ground of safety within the gilt frame. It almost seemed as though his lips moved and he whispered:

"I had my troubles too, but they are not now important, even as I, myself, am no longer of any consequence. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes—be they papers or flesh and blood, they crumble equally well."

* * * * * * *

In the War Department, at the other end of the long corridor, Christine Gray adjusted her veil and asked for half a day's leave of absence. She ran down the large stone steps at the front of the building rather hurriedly, for she had a luncheon engagement and was already a little late.

Christine pursued her way down F Street, her color a little higher than usual and her eyes shining with excitement.

At the door of the Losekam she paused, and, after hesitating a minute or two, ran lightly up the stairs. A round table laid for two was waiting by the window and a man rose with an exclamation of pleasure and advanced to meet her.

"You said two o'clock," she remarked as she seated herself and removed her gloves, "but I fear I'm a little late. I hope I have not kept you waiting, Mr. Rivers."

XIX

Mr. Rivers was just now a very busy man. He was not only Representative from the Fourteenth District of Virginia, he was also Miss Isabel Byrd's fiancé, and the combination of two such functions was quite enough to occupy the days of the average man very comfortably.

In addition, however, Mr. Rivers had various little matters of a private character which must receive his personal attention, and which he was very conscientious about not neglecting. Therefore he was obliged to arrange his engagements carefully in order that they might not conflict, and dovetail them into one another with neatness and dispatch.

It was customary for him to drop in at a florist's en route to the Capitol each morning to procure flowers for his betrothed. He liked to select them himself, and therefore did not adopt the simpler plan of leaving a standing order.

Isabel provided with roses or orchids, and a fresh white carnation selected for his own buttonhole, it was not unusual for Mr. Rivers to leave a second order and to write a few words on the card which accompanied it in his neat, ornamental backhand. Sometimes it was a quotation; at others an original sentiment quite worthy the distinction of being quoted in its turn had the world but known of its existence.

As he sat at the little round table in the Losekam,

handsome, well groomed, and debonair, wearing to perfection that air of deferential attention so gratifying to the *genus femininum*, the Member from Virginia was very pleasant to look upon. It was small wonder, therefore, that the girl opposite paid more attention to her companion than her lunch, and breathed a little sigh of regret when the waiter brought coffee with its accompanying air of finality.

"And now," he remarked genially, "I have still a spare hour or so. What shall we do with it?"

Christine stirred her coffee reflectively. She had a question to ask which she had heretofore resolutely kept in the background lest its answer should cast a shadow upon her holiday. She looked thoughtfully into the depths of her cup before speaking, while he noted the length of the dark, curled lashes fringing her white eyelids and the little frown which wrinkled her smooth brow. Resting his arms on the table, he leaned forward slightly.

"What is it?" he said gently, "what troubles you?"

"I'm not troubled," she returned, "I'm only curious."

"Well?"

Christine was laying the table-cloth in little folds and devoting her whole attention to the operation.

"I read in the paper last night," she continued slowly, "that your engagement was announced to Miss Byrd, and I wondered if it could be true."

It was delightful to hear the frank, hearty laugh with which the Hon. Charles Rivers greeted this remark, thus repudiating the allegation quite as convincingly as a flat denial, with perhaps a slighter sense of perjury.

"How perfectly absurd!" he said.

Two little spirits leaped into the girl's brown eyes and lighted flaming torches there.

"Then it isn't true?" she questioned persistently.

Again the Member from Virginia laughed cheerfully.

"My dear child," he said indulgently, "you don't understand newspapers. If I had been married as many times as I've been reported engaged, I'd be a Mormon indeed. The papers must have something to write about and we public men are the victims."

"I only asked," she said a little breathlessly, "because I was interested. You know I'm engaged myself."

Mr. Rivers knew this fact very well; he had learned it in the early stages of their acquaintance, and, indeed, had pulled a few underground wires at the War Department which had finally landed a certain young second lieutenant safely in Alaska, where he would be unable to resist any poaching upon his preserves. He felt, however, that it was time to change the subject and therefore looked at his watch.

"Come," he remarked cheerfully, "time is passing. What shall we do?"

"Well," returned Christine meditatively, putting on her gloves, "I'd like awfully to go through the Octagon House. You don't mind, do you?"

He did not mind at all. On the contrary, the Octagon House appeared to him as a very satisfactory place in which to linger for a while longer with his present companion. Its location, with the probable accompanying freedom from interruption, appealed more strongly to his sense of the fitness of things than a walk through the more exclusive residence section or crowded shopping district.

So they went out into the winter sunshine, the girl chatting brightly, and the man responding to her mood in a manner subtly flattering by his evident pleasure in her society and genuine interest in her most casual remarks.

"Let's go around back of the State Department," she suggested, and they walked slowly about the half circle south of the great white building, passing beneath the window from which Mr. Rivers had gazed a few hours previous while gravely discussing affairs of the nation. He looked up at it curiously, and Christine followed his glance with interest.

"It's just a big, white prison," she said, "with people chained to desks, grinding their lives out."

"They are paid, you know," remarked the member of the Finance Committee suggestively.

"There isn't enough money in the Treasury," she retorted quickly, "to pay a human being for degenerating into a machine, and I've noticed that it always happens to those who stay there long enough."

"I said you wouldn't like it, you know," remarked Mr. Rivers as she paused abruptly.

"Well, you were right—I hate it. All the same," she added with a quick display of dimples, "I'm awfully grateful to you for putting me there."

The Member of Congress laughed as he ran lightly up the steps of the Octagon House and pushed open the door.

"Come in," he said gayly, "I want to do the honors."

"It's cold," said Christine, "awfully cold. I don't think I want to see the house, after all."

She followed her companion, nevertheless, as he passed

from room to room, and at the foot of the stairs stopped suddenly.

"Look," she exclaimed, "isn't this funny?"

Mr. Rivers paused in the midst of his remarks upon the symmetry of the stairway and turned towards his companion. Christine held in her hand two bits of paper tied together by a twisted cord of red, white, and blue thread; one piece was blank, on the other a few words were distinctly legible.

"*The policy of this Government in regard to the Roostchook,*" she read aloud as Mr. Rivers held out his hand for the paper.

The Member of Congress scrutinized each word carefully and finally turned the paper around and examined a minute hieroglyphic in the corner.

"What letters are these?" he inquired quickly, taking the paper nearer the light.

Christine followed curiously. She saw no reason that a scrap of State Department stationery should arouse an excitement tending to relegate her small self to the background, and therefore again took possession of her discovery with an injured air.

"Well," she said indifferently, "the writing is very scratchy but the letters are plain enough—D. L.

"I wonder," she continued reflectively, "where I can have seen that long word—Roostchook; it looks awfully familiar."

The Member of Congress held out his hand for the paper, which he folded carefully and put in his card-case.

"Let us go upstairs," he said quietly. "I have a fancy to explore the old house thoroughly."

The Octagon House was empty indeed to-day, for

Colonel St. John was on duty at the Department as watchman, and therefore unable to render any assistance as janitor or guide, and apparently no other visitors wished to go sightseeing that afternoon. Mr. Rivers was very thorough in his explorations. He went through the dusty old rooms slowly, opening closet doors and tapping the walls inquiringly, almost as though expecting a response. On the landing of the third floor he paused before a door upon which was fastened a neat white card bearing the inscription, "Janitor's Room. Not on Exhibition." A second card bore the brief but definite statement, " Out."

Mr. Rivers perused the bits of pasteboard with interest, and even went so far as to unobtrusively turn the handle of the door, which very properly resisted such unwarranted intrusion. The janitor had that morning provided his apartment with a new lock, which proved itself satisfactory on trial.

The Member of Congress stroked his mustache reflectively.

" I think," he remarked after a long silence, " I will go up into the attic. Will you come?"

Christine shook her head and seated herself on an unsteady old chair outside the janitor's door.

" I'm tired," she replied quietly, " and I don't think I like this house after all. I'll wait here, if you really want to go."

" I won't be long," he returned, his hand on the door leading into the attic, and with a nod and smile he disappeared.

Christine shivered as she leaned against the wall beside her. The exhilaration of the early afternoon had passed, leaving in its stead an odd sensation of oppres-

sion. She felt aggrieved that a dusty attic should offer attractions superior to those she had been led to believe she possessed in no limited degree, and much regretted the suggestion of a visit to the old house, whose sense of emptiness had impressed her most unpleasantly. On the whole, the afternoon since lunch had been disappointing.

The short winter's day was waning and the hall beside her had become dusky and forbidding. She suddenly remembered strange stories she had heard of the Octagon House after nightfall and glanced apprehensively about. What could keep Mr. Rivers in the attic? Her head ached and she felt languid and miserable.

Quite unconscious that she was merely feeling the effects of a natural reaction from the afternoon's pleasure, Christine pressed her forehead against the cold wall beside her and sighed impatiently.

In a moment she had sprung, terrified, to her feet, for from the blank wall at her side came an echoing sigh, distinct and unmistakable, hopeless in its import, and giving the impression of bodily as well as mental suffering. As Christine stood petrified upon the landing she was conscious of a low muttering, slowly dying away, only to commence again with increased vigor. And again the sigh—melancholy, appealing, unendurable.

With a shriek of terror the girl turned and fled, her hands clasped over her ears and her trembling limbs almost refusing to support her. Upon reaching the street she did not wait for her escort. Leaving him to meet unprotected whatever fate might await him, she sought the shelter of her boarding-house as speedily as possible. As she reached the front steps she paused suddenly.

"There," she remarked aloud, "I forgot all about Mr. Rivers."

That gentleman, absorbed in picking his way carefully among the empty tin cans, piles of rags, and other *débris* of the attic, was much alarmed by the girl's scream of fright and the sound of her retreating footsteps.

He started at once in anxious pursuit and listened to her story, which, told in the stiff boarding-house parlor, lost much of its reality, even to Christine herself.

But late that evening the Member of Congress in the privacy of his own apartments carefully recalled each word of her narrative, and finally took from his card-case the two bits of paper and gave them his close attention.

"I wonder," he remarked, returning the papers to the seclusion of the card-case, "whether it was imagination or—— Anyway, I'll send roses to-morrow."

XX

WHERE was David Leigh? This was the question which agitated Mrs. Colson's boarding-house from garret to cellar and caused endless comment and conjecture among the lesser lights of the Department of State. The higher officials said little for publication, but frequently conferred among themselves, apparently to no purpose. The private secretary was missing; that fact was self-evident, but beyond it was a silence as impenetrable as the silence of the grave itself.

"It's my belief," remarked Miss Jackson with the air of one who expects to create a sensation,—"it's my belief, Mrs. Colson, that he committed suicide. He may have been crossed in love, you know."

This theory, having been advanced every night at dinner since Leigh's disappearance, failed to make the impression which might otherwise have been expected.

"Much more likely to owe money and be in hiding somewhere," said the old gentleman with the gray mustache gruffly.

"Oh General!" expostulated the ladies in staccato chorus.

"I feel for his mother," said Mrs. Colson, ignoring the fact that David was well known to have been an orphan for many years.

"Ah, it is we poor women who always suffer in such cases," murmured the White House Baby, helping her-

self liberally to mint sauce, " but, then, when do we *not* suffer?"

" Well," said Miss Jackson thoughtfully, " I must say I would like to know what has become of him."

And in quite another part of the city a girl repeated this remark as she stood before her mirror adding the finishing touches to her evening toilet.

Isabel Byrd was, so her aunt affirmed, as cross as two sticks. Nothing suited her. It was stupid at home and Washington was populated with intolerable bores, not the least of whom was her distinguished affianced, who was to dine with them to-night *en famille* and escort her to Mrs. Redmond's box at the theatre.

Isabel fastened her necklace with a vindictive snap, She hated sleek black hair and silky mustaches; she hated immaculate shirt fronts with little pearl studs; she hated box parties; she hated everything—and most of all she hated David Leigh.

"A sneak," she said hotly to her reflection in the mirror, " a dishonorable sneak, but I *would* like to know where he is."

Down in the library Senator Byrd made substantially the same remark to his prospective son-in-law as they waited for dinner to be announced, and the Member of Congress acquiesced absently.

" The Secret Service," affirmed the Senator contemptuously, " has made a fizzle of the case. I tell you, Rivers, it's a flat impossibility for a man to march off the face of the earth in this day and generation. The police force——"

" Can sometimes be squared," interrupted Rivers quietly.

" What do you mean?"

"Merely that no official organization is without its vulnerable corner. Perfect-looking apples are sometimes rotten at the core, you know."

"To what apple are you alluding?" inquired Senator Byrd dryly.

The younger man laughed and passed his hand caressingly over his mustache.

"Confidentially speaking," he said slowly, "the President——"

Now the Hon. Charles Rivers was well known to be in close touch with the head of the nation. Indeed, it was rumored that in case of a vacancy occurring in the Cabinet his appointment thereto was a foregone conclusion. It was also whispered that he was far from averse to accepting such an honor, regarding it as another step towards the Presidential chair, for Mr. Rivers was ambitious, and in America all things are possible, provided the right strings are pulled to bring them about.

Senator Byrd knew this. He also knew the President.

"I understand what you mean," he said thoughtfully,—"at least I think so, though he has never put it into words so far as I am aware. I hope he never may."

"And I," said Rivers composedly, "hope to see the matter sifted to the bottom and justice administered unflinchingly. I have studied the subject from the disappearance of the first papers and have reluctantly arrived at my conclusion. I agree with the President."

"You are wrong," said Senator Byrd positively, "*wrong*. I would stake my honor on it."

"I believe," continued Rivers slowly, "Leigh abstracted the papers with the full knowledge of the

Secretary, and that they are in collusion. I believe the Secretary, and he only, knows where to find David Leigh."

"But the motive?"

"Ah, that, I grant you, is a mystery yet to be unravelled. I am inclined to look for the woman in the case, '*cherchez la femme*,' you know."

"Hush," interrupted the Senator hastily, "Isabel."

But it was too late. It was, indeed, Isabel standing in the doorway, her red-gold hair and white frock brought out most effectively by the dark background. Mr. Rivers had never thought his fiancée half so charming as when she advanced tempestuously and faced him with blazing cheeks and flashing eyes.

"I heard you," she said, ignoring his outstretched hand, "I—heard you!"

Both men had risen upon her entrance and remained speechless.

Senator Byrd glanced nervously about and breathed a sigh of apprehension. His daughter was plainly a prey to the demon of temper which he had hoped was relegated to her stormy childhood and before which he had always stood powerless. Had she been a boy, he sometimes reflected, he would have known how to deal with her, but a girl was very different. So the Senator subjected the imaginary boy to severe discipline, while the flesh-and-blood girl grew apace.

"Spoiled to death," her aunt lamented, but "mighty lovable," her father thought.

Just now, however, he wished the boy existed as he advanced and laid a hesitating hand upon her arm.

"Dinner is late," he remarked tentatively, with the laudable desire of diverting her attention.

But Isabel shook off the hand impatiently and addressed herself to her lover.

"How dare you say such things?" she demanded, with an emphatic stamp of her white-shod foot, "how *dare* you?"

"Isabel," interrupted her father anxiously, "my dear child."

"It isn't so," continued the girl quickly. "Why, Mr. Redmond is the best man in the whole world. How dare you criticise him? How dare you even think such things, much less say them? I *know* it isn't so."

"How do you know?" inquired Rivers coolly; "in fact, how do you know anything about it?"

"I know it isn't so," she said simply, "because I know the Secretary."

The Member of Congress laughed sarcastically.

"Oh," he said, "is that it? I thought perhaps Leigh might have taken you into his confidence,—you used to be uncommonly chummy, you know,—and—well, you seem to take a most extraordinary interest in the matter."

The color left Isabel's cheeks suddenly and her attitude became tense and rigid. The watchful Senator knew the signs of the times, and thought regretfully of the explosion to follow.

"Dinner is served," said the butler, appearing opportunely.

With a polite bow and an air of tolerant benignancy Mr. Rivers smiled at his betrothed and offered his arm.

"Let us bury the hatchet," he said suavely, "and go to dinner."

But Isabel was already half way across the room.

"I hate you!" she exclaimed, pausing suddenly; "there! I'm glad I've said it. I hate you!"

"Upon my word," he exclaimed as the library door slammed emphatically.

"She doesn't mean it, Rivers," said the Senator anxiously; "I assure you she doesn't know what she's saying."

The door opened again and a white hand and arm appeared in the aperture.

"Take it back," said a muffled voice, "I never did want it very much," and a small object fell on the rug beside the Member of Congress as the door closed again and swiftly flying feet could be heard ascending the stairs.

The Hon. Charles Rivers stooped and picked up the ring.

"To-morrow," he remarked, watching the diamond flash, "I will put this on again. We will have a few tears and an affecting reconciliation. Don't apologize, Senator, I like a girl of spirit—and I understand women."

He put the ring in his pocket and walked thoughtfully to the window and back.

"All the same," he continued gravely, "I have got to prove to her that I am right, and *you* have got to make her be quiet. It's a pity she overheard. Can you keep her from talking to anybody—mind you, I mean anybody whatever?"

"Yes," said the harassed Senator, "yes, certainly. Let us go to dinner, Rivers; I think Isabel will not appear. Perhaps you will kindly make her excuses to Mrs. Redmond at the theatre and say she is indisposed."

Mr. Rivers cheerfully agreed to deliver the message

and proceeded to enjoy his dinner with unalloyed appetite, while Isabel lay face downward upon her bed, her pretty gown crushed and forgotten, and her slight form shaken with a tempest of angry sobs.

Senator Byrd, after the departure of his guest, sat before his library fire and consumed many meditative cigars.

He felt relieved to have no imperative engagement demanding his presence and disinclined for any definite occupation. So the Senator smoked on, pondering over many things as the fragrant Havanas slowly disappeared and the moments passed.

He thought of the guest from whom he had just parted.

"A bright fellow, by Jove! with a keen intellect. Undoubtedly the coming man. Isabel is uncommonly fortunate."

He thought long and anxiously about the complications in the State Department and their problematical outcome: of the Secretary, gentle, courteous, honorable, and of sound judgment; a man so popular in his party that he had more than once been suggested as a successor to the President; a man with few enemies and many friends, and apparently incapable of a dishonorable thought; of David Leigh, and of the necessarily intimate and confidential relations of a private secretary to his chief.

He thought of Isabel and of her mother, dead since her birth. Something had given way in the Senator's heart the day he followed his young wife to her grave, and the vacuum had never been quite filled.

"It's a little girl, dearest," she had whispered, "*our* little girl, and I want so awfully to live for her and

for you." The Senator let his cigar go out, holding it listlessly in his hand as he lived again in the past.

"You will make her happy, won't you?" the faint voice had continued. "I want her to be very happy, and when she grows up she must marry the man she *loves*, as I did, dear—as I did."

Well, he had tried to make her happy—Esther's child, with Esther's eyes and voice. "If her mother had lived——"

The log smouldered and fell apart, and Senator Byrd roused himself abruptly, put out the lights, and went upstairs. As he passed his daughter's door he paused and knocked softly.

"Come in," called Isabel, "I've been waiting a long time," and he smiled a little as he turned on the light and closed the door.

Isabel had gone to bed, and now sat upright among the pillows, her bright hair streaming down her back, and her arms stretched out towards her father.

"I made an exhibition of myself," she exclaimed, pulling his cheek down to hers, "didn't I, daddy, as usual, and you were sorry."

"Well," agreed the Senator, "I think you did, little girl. I *was* sorry."

"I'm not," she said with a defiant toss of her head, "he deserved it, and I hope it made him uncomfortable."

The Senator thought of Mr. Rivers's placid enjoyment of his dinner and made no reply. Isabel rested her head on his shoulder and sighed contentedly.

"I'm glad you came in," she said slowly; "somehow I feel awfully lonely to-night."

The Senator had felt lonely also down by the library

fire, so he simply smoothed her hair caressingly and said nothing.

"He's been gone almost a week," said the girl suddenly. "What do you suppose has become of him?"

"I don't know, dear." The Senator made no pretence at not understanding to whom she referred.

"But what do you think?"

"I think," he said gravely, "it looks very black for Leigh, Isabel."

"But all the same," she said eagerly, "all the same, father, you don't believe what Mr. Rivers said, do you?"

Senator Byrd thoughtfully twisted a lock of the shining hair about his finger.

"No, dear," he said at last, "I don't believe it."

"Oh father," she exclaimed with an emphatic squeeze, "you're *such* a sensible man."

The Senator laughed and asked some questions as to her engagements for the next few days. She was going to be with Mrs. Redmond at the diplomatic breakfast on New Year's Day, she said, after that she did not know; she would like to go away—Washington was so tiresome. The Senator suggested a trip abroad when Congress adjourned.

"Unless," he remarked with some hesitation, "you will be thinking of getting married about that time."

Isabel sat upright and wrinkled her white forehead portentously.

"I might as well tell you, father," she said solemnly, "I have decided never to marry. You don't mind supporting me, do you?"

The Senator did not mind at all; he thought, however, she might sometime change her views on this point, but she shook her head positively.

"I hate men!" she said petulantly; "I hate them all, except you, and I won't marry anybody."

"You shall marry the man you love," said her father gently; "but, Isabel, I know you could only love an honorable man. Isn't that true?"

Isabel sank back among her pillows and turned her face to the wall.

"All the nice men are dishonorable," she sobbed, "and all the honorable men are nasty. I shall never, *never* marry."

Senator Byrd felt strangely incompetent as he closed his daughter's door some time later and sought his own room.

"She needs her mother," he thought regretfully. "Esther would have known just what to do, while I should only bungle. If she had only been a boy——"

And the Senator slowly unfastened his collar.

XXI

It was New Year's Day and official Washington was astir early, for the Diplomatic Corps and officers of the Army and Navy must pay their respects to the President, as well as test the contents of various hospitable punch-bowls later on, according to long-established custom. So the city was gay with cocked hats and brass buttons, and the small boys upon the curbstones all determined upon a military career, composed of glory and gold lace.

The Hon. Charles Rivers breakfasted at the Metropolitan Club, read the morning paper, and considered how best to dispose of the hours intervening before any social obligations claimed his attention. He was well known to be an economist in time, and liked to employ every minute profitably.

He looked over his mail carefully, and was surprised not to see a penitent little note from his fiancée. He did indeed receive a missive, small, perfumed, and apparently interesting, for he read it twice before relegating it to the waste-basket, but it was not the one for which he waited.

"Poor little thing," he reflected as he buttoned his overcoat, "it *is* a dull life for her. I'll drop in for a while this morning."

As he bent his steps among the respectable thoroughfares frequented by the shabby genteel he reviewed the

events of the preceding evening, and was astonished to find himself decidedly apprehensive lest he should not have an opportunity to return to its legitimate owner the ring now snugly ensconced in his waistcoat pocket, and as he ascended the steps of the most dingy house in the square he was conscious of a feeling of resentment against David Leigh nearly akin to jealousy, a sensation to which the Member of Congress had hitherto believed himself immune.

"What a pretty spitfire she looked," he remarked aloud as he pulled the bell and inquired for Miss Gray.

Christine was in her third floor back, improving the opportunity offered her by a legal holiday to perform the mysterious rite dear to most women known as "fixing up the top drawer." A heterogeneous collection of treasures was heaped beside the bureau, and Christine herself sat upon the floor, surrounded by bits of ribbon, soiled gloves, faded flowers, and the various trifles accumulated by girls in all stations of life. She had paused in her researches, however, and was gazing with a puzzled expression at a long, sealed envelope just unearthed from beneath a pile of handkerchiefs.

"Where did I get it?" she remarked, turning it over curiously, "where in the world did I get it?"

The one word indistinctly written in pencil afforded no clue, so, after hesitating a moment, she broke the seal and drew out the enclosure.

"Department of State. Confidential," she read aloud, then paused suddenly and turned over the papers with a troubled face. Christine had been employed by the Government long enough to realize that a document so labelled had no legal right in her top bureau drawer.

So she rested her chin in her hand and looked at the

papers very much as she might have regarded an unwelcome black spider.

"I know," she exclaimed suddenly, "I know. It was Mr. Marks—the ossification papers and the white hyacinths. I remember all about it, but how did he——" and again the chin went down into the hand.

It was at this juncture Mr. Rivers was announced by the slipshod maid, who looked at her with an ill-concealed curiosity of which Christine was entirely unconscious. With an exclamation of relief she gathered the papers together, thrust the envelope into the bosom of her shirtwaist, and ran downstairs.

The Member of Congress listened patiently to the confused account of the white hyacinths, tiresome young men, and official papers, into which she launched as soon as possible, ending with the lucid remark,—

"And when I heard you were here I was *so* delighted, for I knew you could tell me what to do with them."

"Perhaps," he suggested at last, "if you would let me look at them, or at least tell me what they are about, I might be able to be of some assistance."

"Why," she said, producing the long envelope, "it's awfully funny, but do you remember the word on the scrap of paper we found in the Octagon House—Roostchook, I think, or something like that? Well, it's about that; I mean the papers are about Roostchook—whatever *that* is."

"Let me see them," said Rivers quickly, his manner alert and interested.

With growing astonishment he took them to the window, read them slowly, returned them to their envelope, and put it carefully in his pocket.

"Now," he said quietly, "tell me about it all over

again," and Christine repeated her story, adding anxiously:

"And what had I better do about it? I feel dreadfully worried."

He laughed carelessly and seated himself on the sofa beside her.

"Don't worry," he said, "it brings wrinkles. You need not give the subject another thought, but it is fortunate you happened to give the papers to me. Of course, I shall simply return them to the State Department and there the matter will end, but don't accept any more presents from this peculiar young man without looking at them. It would be interesting to know where he got them and why."

"Well," replied Christine, dimpling suddenly, "you can ask him. I expect him here this morning."

"By the way," he interrupted hastily, "don't mention the papers to him. I do not think it would be wise to agitate the subject, especially as he has apparently forgotten it."

"But," objected Christine, "I want to ask him where he got them."

"Much better let the whole thing drop and forget it. Now let us talk about something more interesting—yourself, for instance. Have you recovered from your fright? I reproach myself for leaving you alone even for a few moments, but I am interested in old houses and wanted to explore. Would you trust yourself to me again?"

"Yes," said the girl shyly, "anywhere. But," she added with a little shiver, "it was not imagination. I *did* hear that sigh, and it was heart-rending."

"Sometime I am going there to listen for it, mean-

while I have brought you a little New Year's gift to help you forget an unpleasant experience."

With shining eyes and trembling fingers Christine unwrapped the little box and raised the lid.

"Oh!" she gasped, and relapsed into wondering silence.

The Member of Congress lifted a string of pearls from which hung a little ruby heart.

"I brought it to you myself," he whispered, leaning towards her, "that I might put it on. May I?

"I thought the pearls were perfect," he continued as he fastened the clasp, "but now I see them on your neck they look less pure by contrast."

It was at this interesting juncture Mr. Marks elected to appear, his hair more rampantly erect than usual, and an unfortunate tendency to talk through his nose aggravated by a cold in the head. He carried a large handkerchief with a red border which he was obliged to use frequently, and was sublimely unconscious of the lack of cordiality in his welcome.

After an interested scrutiny of his rival for some minutes Rivers departed, donning his overcoat in the contracted little hall with a strange mixture of sensations. The Roostchook papers were safe in his pocket, and he was proved wrong in the theory he had advanced to Senator Byrd. It now only remained for him to restore them to their proper custodian and to put the Secret Service men in touch with Mr. Marks in order to recover the second lost paper. His course was perfectly clear, and the whole unfortunate affair seemed to be gradually drawing to a close.

Yet, as he walked slowly down the street, Mr. Rivers had not the bearing of a man pleased with the world in

general. Rather, he was lost in the mazes of a brown study which did not appear to afford him much gratification.

"Redmond forced to resign," he said reflectively to his inner self, "forced to resign and out of the way, it is all plain sailing and the White House one term nearer."

The wind blew sharply around the corner and took liberties with his hat, but he had a reason for turning down that particular street and did so after a brief battle with the interfering elements. It was Mr. Rivers's custom to accomplish whatever object he had in view in spite of obstacles, so he mounted the steps of the Octagon House, breathless but triumphant.

Apparently his previous visit had but whetted his curiosity, for once again he explored the old rooms carefully, regardless of the dust which marked his immaculate coat-sleeve with unsightly streaks.

The lower floor was indisputably empty; he therefore quietly ascended the curved stairway and explored the second and third floors.

The caretaker's door was inhospitably shut, but as he lingered on the landing he heard a low, indistinguishable murmur, and a soothing, decided voice in reply; he also heard a clinking as of a spoon against a glass and the unmistakable gurgle of water when poured from a jug. A chair was moved hastily, scraping noisily over the bare boards, and the doorknob turned quietly.

Instinctively the Member of Congress stepped into the adjoining room and partly closed the door in such a manner that he could command a view of the stairs and remain himself unseen. He was conscious of a decided thrill of astonishment at the figure which pres-

ently passed within his range of vision. Instead of the typical janitor, careworn and shabby, he saw an immaculate old gentleman with shining silk hat and carefully buttoned black frock-coat over pearl-gray trousers, and a carnation in his buttonhole.

"Upon my word," remarked Mr. Rivers aloud as he heard the front door close, "it grows interesting."

Advancing softly, he stood before the caretaker's room and gazed earnestly at the placard upon the door. As he stood there he heard a sigh from within, long, slow, and filled with weariness, such a sigh as Christine Gray had described so graphically when she told him the story of her fright. The Member of Congress did not disdain to put his ear close to the door and listen intently; he did not fear the supernatural, and the actual was, as he said, interesting. The sigh was repeated, followed after a moment's silence by the low muttering he had previously heard.

After a little hesitation he knocked softly and, getting no response, turned the knob quietly.

The room looked bare and comfortless enough as he entered, with its few accessories for the convenience of its occupant. Moreover, it was quite empty.

The uninvited guest looked curiously about and sniffed the air thoughtfully, for the odor of kerosene was apparent, although no lamp was visible. It seemed to him to come from an adjoining closet, and he was about to follow it when his glance fell upon the rickety table, upon which a piece of tracing-paper was carefully fastened with thumb-tacks. With an exclamation of astonishment he examined the incomplete drawing, intently following its details and now and then giving vent to an astonished whistle.

"Water!" said a voice suddenly, thick and inarticulate; "for God's sake, water!"

Rivers straightened himself abruptly and felt a momentary regret that he was alone and unarmed. The sound undoubtedly came from behind the door he had supposed led into the closet, and whence now proceeded the low muttering he had heard from the landing, varied at intervals by a long sigh and the movement of a restless body, unmistakably human and evidently in pain.

Wasting no time in speculation, he opened the door leading into the small inner room and paused upon the threshold to reconnoitre. He saw a kerosene-stove doing its odorous best to consume the surrounding oxygen, a broken chair on which were grouped a few bottles and glasses, and upon the floor in the corner a narrow mattress upon which tossed and muttered a figure.

"Water!" it cried imperatively. "I'm burning up, I tell you—water!"

The Hon. Charles Rivers took a glass of water from the chair and advanced to the cot. Kneeling down upon the dusty boards, regardless of their effect upon his spotless trousers, he held the water to the hot, parched lips, and exhaustively studied the flushed face upon the pillow.

Rising from his knees he replaced the glass upon the chair and went into the caretaker's room with the manner of one who walks in his sleep. Involuntarily he bent over the table and again examined the unfinished drawing. After a while his hand sought his pocket and he produced the white envelope so recently escaped from Christine's upper drawer. He weighed it carefully, first in one hand, then in the other, advanced a

few steps, hesitated, and advanced again, his fingers tightening about the envelope.

"His daughter Isabel," murmured the figure on the floor, "announces the engagement of his daughter Isabel—water!—I want water!"

The Member of Congress again knelt beside the cot and put the glass to the fevered lips. He remained in this lowly position for some minutes, and when he rose held nothing in his hands except an empty glass.

When he emerged from the Octagon House a little later he walked with the preoccupied air of one absorbed in thought, and was even guilty of not returning the salutations of passing acquaintances. Upon reaching the Club he sat down beside a little table and ordered a brandy and soda.

"And let it be stiff," he admonished the waiter.

XXII

COLONEL ST. JOHN, on leaving his residence, drew on a pair of fresh gloves and walked briskly up the street. He intended to do a little New Year's visiting and the prospect was exhilarating, for he was by nature gregarious and had been for some time debarred from the pleasures of society. Therefore he walked quickly, with head erect and shoulders well back, as became a military man.

Threading his way among the carriages and pedestrians which blocked the street before the house of the Secretary of State, he hesitated a moment, then walked boldly up the broad stone steps in the wake of the German Ambassador.

The Diplomatic Corps had called upon the President and its members were now assembled in full regalia to partake of the breakfast annually tendered them by the Secretary of State.

"Madame," remarked Monsieur du Pré impressively, "may the New Year contain for you only happiness."

And the little Frenchman, having exchanged the compliments of the season with his hostess, twisted up the ends of his mustache and passed on.

"How tired she looks, *la belle Madame*," he remarked to Lyndhurst, whom he encountered in the doorway; "the season has begun to weary her."

The Englishman, after a moment's survey, acquiesced.

"She looks ill," he said quietly, "but then she has been standing a long time at the White House. No doubt, as you say, she is tired."

Monsieur du Pré turned to greet an acquaintance and Lyndhurst resumed his position in the doorway, enjoying the brilliant spectacle, for the representatives of the various countries wore their native costumes and the spacious rooms glowed with the colors of the Orient and glittered with the gold lace and uniforms of many nations.

The Chinese Minister conversed amicably with the Secretary, whose tall, spare figure in its black coat looked sombre indeed beside the robes celestial of his guest, and Lyndhurst smiled at the contrast.

Suddenly he saw an ashen pallor overspread Mrs. Redmond's face, and she swayed as though about to fall. Recovering herself with a visible effort, she extended her hand to the British Ambassador and returned his salutation.

Following the direction of her eyes, the young Attaché saw nothing alarming—merely the dignified back of an old gentleman in severely correct morning costume about to pass into the adjoining room. Lyndhurst recollected that Miss Byrd was also there and prepared to follow him. As he turned to do so he saw Count Valdmir enter and greet Mrs. Redmond; he also saw her whisper a few hurried words, to which the Russian apparently made a soothing reply and immediately sought the dining-room.

Lyndhurst wondered greatly. He had found much food for reflection since his sojourn in America, and the longer he thought the more puzzled he became, so

he merely followed the example of the old gentleman and went into the dining-room.

Colonel St. John had yielded to a sudden impulse in presenting himself at his daughter's house. He knew he would have no difficulty in gaining admittance, as he had among his relics of past prosperity garments suitable for the occasion. He trusted to the severely aristocratic bearing he could assume when necessary to conceal the fact that though said garments were of irreproachable fit and quality, they were somewhat out of date as to style, and handed his overcoat to the servant so haughtily that the man forebore to notice its cut and deposited it among its fellows with marked respect.

He had no definite object in view, and was well aware of the risk he ran in thus exposing himself to public gaze. Colonel St. John, however, had nursed a wounded spirit ever since his daughter had visited him, and was sullenly determined to extort money from her in spite of the injunctions to the contrary he had received from Count Valdmir. Also, he wished to prove to the latter that he possessed some independence of spirit. In fact, he had grown restive under his chains and thought he saw his opportunity of escape through his daughter, or his daughter's husband. Consequently, like certain species of wild animals, Colonel St. John cringed before his master while entirely in his power, but snarled and showed his teeth when escape seemed not impossible. As to Lyndhurst—well, he trusted to the crowded rooms to avoid him. Moreover, a contingency had recently arisen making it most desirable for him to leave America as speedily and quietly as possible, and he felt convinced that the time had arrived when a bold stroke was advisable.

The Colonel, therefore, bowed low before Mrs. Redmond, and much enjoyed the pallor which overspread her face and the trembling hand extended to the British Ambassador, who followed in his wake. Already he saw himself living in luxurious idleness in some congenial retreat across the water, with a bottomless purse in Washington always to be opened by a suggested return to that city.

So he entered the dining-room jauntily and helped himself to a glass of wine. Colonel St. John had been a connoisseur in wine before his palate had become vitiated by bad whiskey, and the vintage offered his guests by the Secretary was beyond reproach. The Colonel took a second glass immediately, then made the circuit of the room and lifted another decanter; he evidently thought he was going to enjoy himself very much.

Count Valdmir followed Colonel St. John to the dining-room as quickly as possible.

"Do not be alarmed," he had said quietly to Mrs. Redmond in reply to her agitated whisper, "he shall go immediately. I will see to it."

The Russian anticipated no difficulty in fulfilling his promise. He felt coldly angry that his tool should thus have taken the initiative, and determined to bring their relations to a close as speedily as possible, and ship him to some remote corner of the world where he could be kept stationary by police surveillance.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Colonel," he remarked politely, appearing suddenly at the old man's elbow.

Colonel St. John, however, was on his guard and not to be surprised by a flank attack.

"The pleasure is wholly mine," he replied suavely in his most impressive manner.

"I was much surprised, Colonel, to meet you here."

"Is it not the custom in Russia, Count, for a man to visit his daughter?"

There was undeniable challenge in the last remark, and Colonel St. John raised his glass with the smile of one who has uttered a *bon-mot* and awaits its effect.

The Russian glanced hastily about the crowded room and saw they were unobserved, so he stepped closer to his companion with bent brows and threatening aspect.

"Do you forget the police?" he said in a hurried whisper. "If you become troublesome, I can easily send them to you."

"How well it would look in the newspapers," returned the old man reflectively. "I can see the headlines now: 'Father of Mrs. Redmond, the wife of the Secretary of State,' in large type you know.

"By the way, Count," he continued slowly, "I wish you would visit me at my secluded residence. I need your assistance. There was an unfortunate *contre-temps*. I am in difficulty—quite an embarrassing position for one of my years. I have (no doubt you will be surprised to hear it) a guest."

"A guest?"

Colonel St. John moved towards an open space behind some potted plants.

"Let us stand here," he said composedly, "out of the crush. What a brilliant scene! It quite recalls other days. Yes, Count, a guest. You remember the paper in which you are interested?"

"Be careful. Yes. Did you get it?"

"Ah, thereby hangs a tale. The day after Christmas

my duty to my country—and to you—kept me in the State Department until quite late at night. I went out the door opposite the Mall, preparatory to seeking Jackson City, and——"

"Well?"

Colonel St. John did not reply. His eyes were fixed on the opposite doorway in a helpless, glassy stare, and his knees shook in a manner much at variance with his former air of easy braggadocio.

"Lyndhurst!" he gasped. "He is looking this way. I think he knows me."

Upon reaching the dining-room Lyndhurst adjusted his eyeglasses and looked for Miss Byrd. Before he discovered her, however, he chanced to glance at the opposite corner and noticed the figure he had seen a short time previous and whom he judged to be an unwelcome guest. As he looked his first idle curiosity was replaced by incredulous astonishment, gradually changing into unwilling conviction. And Mrs. Redmond, standing a few inches behind him in the broad hall, looked also with a sickening sense of impending catastrophe not unlike the moments of oppressive breathlessness immediately preceding the crash of a storm.

"He recognizes you," observed Count Valdmir coolly. "I am not sorry. Your blood is on your own head."

"You'll help me out?"

"Not I, Colonel. You came uninvited, and you may get out the best way you can."

The old man laid a shaking hand on his companion's arm.

"Listen," he said quickly, "I was just going to tell you—I've got the paper."

"Which paper? I lack two."

"The first. The story of the Roostchook case: the confidential history—the under side."

"Turn your head aside; Lyndhurst may not be sure of you. Now give it to me."

"It is not here. I left it in my room. If I get away safely,—*safely*, Count,—you shall have it. Otherwise it is lost to Russia."

Count Valdmir hesitated a moment, then lifted the heavy portière beside him.

"This passage," he said hurriedly, "leads into the front hall. Be quick. I will see that you get out safely because I need your assistance; I will also accompany you to the front door to make sure you do not conceal yourself anywhere in this house. As I told you, she shall not be annoyed by you while I can prevent it. This way, Colonel. I will see you later. I must have that paper to-night. Do you understand?"

Lyndhurst watched the two figures disappear behind the heavy portière. Instinctively he turned to follow them, but paused abruptly, for his hostess stood directly in his path, her eyes raised to his filled with the dominant note of appeal that he had once before encountered. And as he hesitated he heard the front door close.

The Englishman took out his monocle, polished and carefully readjusted it. It was his ever-present refuge in moments of embarrassment.

"Madame," said Count Valdmir, appearing suddenly beside them, "will you not allow me to get you a glass of wine? One should welcome the New Year cordially—eh, Lyndhurst?"

"I do not want the wine," said Mrs. Redmond as

they turned away, "but I must sit down a moment; my head whirls."

He drew forward a chair in an alcove in the hall, screened by a tall palm and comparatively quiet.

"Do not be troubled," he said gently, "he has gone. I shall insist upon his leaving the country immediately."

"You are kind sometimes, Count, and I am grateful."

She rested her head against the high, carved back of her chair, and it seemed to the man looking down upon her that the dark mahogany afforded a most appropriate setting for the pure flesh-tints against it. Count Valdmir possessed decided artistic tendencies and appreciated a picture perfect in all its details.

"I am tired," she said, closing her eyes wearily, "very tired."

Outside a carriage-door slammed and the roll of wheels filled the ensuing pause.

The Russian Attaché stood for some minutes in silence, and when at last he spoke it was reluctantly, as though he would gladly have left the stillness unbroken.

"It is—Thursday," he said slowly.

The dark lashes lifted suddenly, and a soft flush replaced the pallor of her cheeks as she replied in a voice which hesitated somewhat, as though unwilling to perform its task of articulation:

"You have said very kind, very complimentary things to me sometimes, Count. I wonder if you mean them? I wonder if you really—care?"

He came closer and leaned over the back of the chair, his hand grasping the grinning griffins carved upon its arms.

"Care!" he said hoarsely. "How like a woman! Care——"

"Hush," she interrupted, "we will be noticed. It is, as you did not fail to remind me, Thursday. I will keep my word unless you voluntarily release me. Now listen."

She paused and touched her lips with her lace-edged handkerchief while the rose in her corsage stirred uneasily.

"To-night," she resumed with an effort, "I had promised to meet you. Instead, you may come here at ten o'clock. I will receive you alone."

"Quite alone?"

"Quite alone, Count Valdmir. Senator Byrd gives a stag dinner and my husband is a guest. I can allow you one hour."

"An hour passes quickly. Can you not be more generous?"

"One hour," she repeated. "I am engaged for the early evening, and later it is not safe. May I expect you?"

"I shall be punctual, Madame."

"Estelle," said the Secretary, appearing from behind the palm, "I have been looking for you. Baron von Wertman is going."

XXIII

SOME hours later Estelle Redmond lay on the couch in her dressing-room with closed eyes and throbbing temples. She heard the voices of the servants as they moved quietly about, setting the house to rights, and submitted unresistingly to the ministrations of Josephine and the cologne bottle. The touch of the maid's cool fingers was pleasant to her hot forehead, and their slow, regular motion insensibly soothing, but at last her mistress turned away her head and motioned her to stop.

"Thank you, Josephine," she said gently, "it was very refreshing. If you will leave me alone now I think I can sleep."

And the maid smoothed the crushed pillow and noiselessly departed.

The winter twilight deepened, and still she lay motionless, gazing with wide, sleepless eyes at the gathering shadows. The room was filled with ghosts, persistent in their silent obtrusiveness.

The ghosts brought pictures with them—a constantly changing panorama which would not be ignored. Again and again it passed before her with increasing distinctness.

She saw a little girl, at first systematically neglected, and left to pick up what crumbs of knowledge she could, and then, grown older, a subject of discussion between her father and his friends; she heard the child's points

checked off one by one,—eyes, hair, complexion,—and one man say with a coarse laugh:

"By Jove, St. John, she'll be your strongest card! Better invest a little money in her."

Well, the money had been spent lavishly, and Estelle understood now how profitable the investment had been.

She recalled the winter in Egypt and the hurried flight thence one night. That was the year her father gave her the opals, with a tender little speech about her mother and the jewels she had left in his keeping for her little girl. And she had guarded them carefully even during the period of poverty and loneliness in Paris. Now she doubted whether her mother had ever seen them, and was oppressed by their possession.

She remembered Berlin and her horrified awakening; also Paris, and the happiness which had come to her there. And always when the scene of retrospection changed from country to country, two dominant figures stood beside her in the foreground—her father and Count Valdmir.

Estelle turned restlessly. Was there no peace in the world? She heard her husband ascend the stairs and pass into her sitting-room. His step, she noted, had become singularly slow of late.

The clock struck six. At ten she would receive Count Valdmir.

Estelle sat suddenly upright with clinched hands and burning cheeks.

"In his own house," she said, glancing towards the next door, "*his own house.*"

She sat for some minutes on the edge of the couch gazing at the portière which hung at the communicating door. As she looked a strange sensation of peace and

security gradually replaced the turmoil of her mind, and her lips curved in a tremulous smile. After a moment she rose and moved slowly towards the door.

"I'll tell him," she whispered as she crossed the room. "Why, of course. It's very easy. I'll tell him everything myself—and he'll understand. He'll be very sorry, but he'll understand."

Her husband sat upon a couch beside the fire leaning back against the soft pillows and watching the flickering light of the burning logs. He did not hear Mrs. Redmond raise the portière and enter, for he was absorbed in thought. Half way across the room she paused uncertainly. How tired he looked—how very tired!

"John," she said softly.

The Secretary turned quickly.

"Room for two," he said, holding out his arms, "room for two, Estelle."

He drew her down upon the couch beside him, her head upon his shoulder. One arm was about her waist, the other held her soft white hand, and occasionally raised it to his lips.

"John," she repeated, and again paused irresolute.

The Secretary looked at his wife and smiled. It was a smile which came from his heart and drove from his face the lines of care. In his eyes shone love,—boundless, generous, and capable of much endurance,—a love based on faith and secure in its utter confidence.

"Is it anything especial, dearest?" he said, the arm about her waist tightening a little.

Mrs. Redmond made an ineffectual effort to speak; her breath came quickly and she was oppressed with a sensation of smothering. Only a moment she hesitated, then looked up into his eyes with an answering smile.

"No, John," she said gently, "I wanted to be with you."

The log blazed up cheerfully, its rosy light falling upon the white folds of her dressing-gown and touching gently her brow and hair.

"Estelle," said the Secretary slowly, "would you like to go abroad?"

"For the summer, dear?"

"For as long as you please."

"But could you be spared indefinitely, John?"

"I think so," he said regretfully; "in fact, Estelle, I think I will be spared altogether. I am going to resign."

"What?"

Mrs. Redmond sat upright and pushed back her hair.

"To resign!" she repeated.

"Do you mind so much giving up your high estate, my dear? I am sorry."

"It isn't that," she said breathlessly; "you know I don't mind anything as long as we are together. But *why* are you going to do it, tell me, John."

"I am getting old," he replied slowly; "official life is too much for me. Since Leigh disappeared I trust nobody, believe in nobody, confide in nobody—except you, dear, always excepting you."

"John," she said, resuming her position within his arms, "it's strange about Mr. Leigh, isn't it?"

"Very strange, Estelle."

"Do you believe him guilty?"

"I don't know," he returned, "I don't know, dear. I hope, if he *is* guilty, he may never be found. I would rather think of him with the benefit of a doubt than with the certainty of conviction."

"Why, John?"

"He was such a fine young fellow—so clean-cut and straightforward. I could not help being much interested in him, and if anyone I have loved and trusted deceives me, for any reason, I think, dear, I had rather not know it. I am not so strong as I once was, and it is that sort of thing which takes the life out of a man."

"Yes," she said tremulously, "yes."

"With all the circumstantial evidence against young Leigh my better judgment tells me he is not guilty, but a victim to something that will yet be explained, but as I said," he continued, drawing her closer, "I'm not so young nor so strong as I once was. Things worry me. I don't suppose I am as capable of handling vexatious problems as I used to be, and so, dear, I'm going to resign."

"They won't let you," she said, speaking with conviction, "the President would never accept your resignation."

"On the contrary, Estelle, he would be very willing. Our relations are not cordial. This morning at the White House before the diplomatic reception we had a most unpleasant interview. Don't ask me to tell you about it; I had thought him my staunch friend until lately, and therein lies the sting."

"Oh," she cried, "I hate him!—I hate him!"

"Hush, dear. Perhaps he is right. He is troubled as well as I, for this Roostchook matter is of vital importance. The loss of the papers just now affects the integrity of the Government—his honor, and most of all mine, Estelle, for they were in my hands for safekeeping."

"And all this," she said bitterly, "comes of a paper —a miserable paper which may be found at any time."

"Ah," he replied, "I would take a new lease on life, little girl, if I could have it in my hands together with the synopsis the President gave me of his policy—you remember I told you about it and how it disappeared also?"

She remembered very well.

"But, John," she said timidly, "I can't see what great harm is done if it *has* been stolen. Isn't it just a tempest in a teapot which will blow over shortly? It seems to me there is a tremendous excitement about a very little matter, after all."

"Estelle," he said, turning back the lace of her loose sleeve and watching the play of the firelight upon her arm, "do you understand what war means?"

"I—think so, John."

"Well, if the stolen papers should be in the possession of the Russian Government, in six months or less this country would be involved in a war which might become international. There would be fatherless children and widows, sacrifice of human life, and unutterable horrors you could not even imagine. Now do you understand the President's attitude?"

She did not reply, and he continued quietly.

"The country needs a more vigorous man to bring it safely through this crisis. I have been put in a position of great trust, weighed, and found wanting. So, dearest, I am going to resign, and Rivers will be made Secretary of State."

"Ah!" the exclamation was expressive, and the Secretary smiled sadly.

"You don't like him," he said; "you would not

want to see him in my place, filling it more efficiently than I have done, is that it, dear? Well, we won't stay here. I think I would not enjoy it myself. We'll go abroad, you and I; after all, we have each other. I will not be sorry to have done with public life. I don't like leaving under a cloud, that's all."

"But, John——"

"Will you play me something, Estelle? We won't talk any more just now. Very soon I must dress and go out. I wish I had not told Byrd I would come. I have a fancy for a little music, and there is none so sweet as yours, so if you don't mind——"

She put her arms about his neck and laid her cheek to his.

"John," she said brokenly, "you will never, never know how much I love you."

And the Secretary held her close, oblivious to everything except the present moment.

"Now," she continued, raising a flushed face and speaking quietly, "put your head on this pillow—so. That poor head which aches from so much thinking. Perhaps things will come out right after all, dear. I will play very softly and you shall go to sleep. I'll wake you in time to dress. Is dinner at eight?"

"Play the old Scotch airs, Estelle," he said as she opened the piano, "I like them best."

So Mrs. Redmond played the old Scotch airs, and the Secretary listened dreamily. Softer and softer grew the music until at last it ceased entirely; the fire snapped and sparkled appreciatively, but the Secretary was asleep.

His wife crossed the room and sank upon her knees beside the couch, her head upon the pillow close to

his. Mechanically she repeated his words in reference to David Leigh,—

"If one I loved has deceived me, I would rather never know it."

How worn he looked. His hand, lying half open upon his knee, was almost transparent in the fitful light of the fire, and now and then the fingers twitched nervously.

The half hour struck. At seven she must wake him; at eight he would be gone, taking with him all her sense of strength and security. At nine she must dress. At ten—how the time flew.

The Secretary stirred in his sleep; she rose and, leaning over the couch, smoothed his hair caressingly, adroitly moving the pillow into a more comfortable position and touching his forehead gently with her lips.

"Judas," she murmured as she returned to the piano.

But the fingers which pressed the keys trembled and produced discord, for the little devils which lurk in the background of life had leaped upon Mrs. Redmond, and she winced before the attack; they are named Regret and Remorse; their arrows are poisoned and their swords two-edged. They are very busy little devils too, for they neglect nobody, and consequently pay a great many visits during the day and night.

XXIV

COUNT VALDMIR adjusted the gold link which held his cuff and surveyed the effect of his immaculate evening costume critically. From head to foot it was beyond reproach. His valet gathered up the *débris* of rejected ties and unsatisfactory shirts and remarked tentatively:

"The old gentleman, sir? He has waited a long time."

"You may bring him in."

Colonel St. John had waited patiently in the small reception-room for an hour or more. The air of debonair assurance he had worn so jauntily that morning had quite departed, leaving in its stead a nervous depression and his customary manner of furtive obsequiousness.

So he returned Count Valdmir's greeting deprecatingly and at once announced his errand.

"I have brought the papers," he said, producing a package from his coat pocket.

"Ah," said the Russian, "that is well."

He held them reflectively, studying the outer wrapper carefully.

"Roostchook. Confidential," he read slowly. "This looks promising, Colonel. Where did you get it?"

Colonel St. John hesitated.

"It is a long story, Count. As I said this morning,

I need your assistance. My position is most embarrassing."

"I have not time to hear you now," said Count Valdmir impatiently, looking at his watch, "nor to examine the papers. I have an important engagement at ten. After all, it does not matter where they came from nor how you procured them, provided they are genuine. If not, Colonel—well, we won't discuss the result."

Putting the package in his desk, he turned the key carefully.

"I am going out," he remarked suggestively, producing a fur-lined overcoat. "I think, Colonel, you will soon be at liberty to leave America. Our work is almost completed. Next week, at the latest, I hope to send in my report to my Government. You will receive an adequate reward, although not perhaps as large as you secured from the Hertford case."

The old man winced perceptibly.

"Count," he said hurriedly, "I am watched. I feel it."

"Ah," replied the Russian indifferently, "doubtless. You have become quite a public character, Colonel, and must expect these annoyances. I have myself to-day employed an agent whom I can trust to shadow you and prevent you from again committing the indiscretion of this morning. No doubt it was he who followed you to-night."

There was malignant hatred in the glance Colonel St. John shot from beneath his lowered eyelids at his companion, and his hand clinched angrily.

"Come," said Valdmir authoritatively, "I am going out and have no idea of leaving you alone in my apartments. Go home."

He spoke very much as though his dog had followed him against his will.

"Yes," said the old man dejectedly, "I'm going, Count."

The figure which crept down the stairs was stooped and feeble and did not suggest the erect, well-clad form which had surprised Mr. Rivers earlier in the day by emerging from the Octagon House. Colonel St. John had aged perceptibly in a few hours, and as he retraced his steps he glanced from side to side in evident apprehension.

"When he opens them," he muttered, "my God! when he opens them!"

Count Valdmir, having disposed of his guest, walked rapidly along, enjoying the keen air of the winter's night. Overhead were myriads of stars, and underfoot the pavements glistened with a powdering of snow. It had sleeted in the afternoon and the parks through which he passed were transformed into fairyland, where every leaf and twig was outlined in a transparent covering which glittered and shone beneath the electric lights.

Count Valdmir's pulses throbbed unaccountably as he walked, and his mind was not occupied with the interview just ended with Colonel St. John; instead he thought exultantly of the interview yet to come with Colonel St. John's daughter, and quickened his pace that he might be punctual.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Redmond in her dressing-room turned slowly from her mirror.

"That will do, Josephine," she said reluctantly .

Josephine breathed a relieved sigh and stepped back to admire her work. Never in all her experience had she found her mistress so difficult to please. One gown

after another had been tried and rejected, and her best efforts as to coiffure had failed to prove satisfactory. Josephine had not suggested rouge to-night, for Mrs. Redmond's cheeks alternately glowed and paled after the manner of the opals in her jewel-case and her eyes shone brilliantly beneath her black brows.

Josephine straightened a fold of the lace which veiled the pale pink underskirt and looked critically at the result. The gown was long and clinging in effect; a demi-toilet of lace and soft silk; the sleeves, open to the shoulder, fell away from the arms in a misty cloud of lace, and the white breast and throat were framed in the same filmy material. The French maid clasped her hands ecstatically.

"Madame is ravishing," she exclaimed; "now, if she would but consent to the opal about her neck it would be complete. The one stone, Madame? It is necessary."

And the opal upon its glittering string of diamonds added an effective finishing-touch.

"Now," remarked Josephine triumphantly, "Madame is indeed irresistible."

"I hope so, I am sure," replied Mrs. Redmond involuntarily as she passed into her sitting-room with its rose-shaded lights and glowing fire.

It seemed to Count Valdmir, when he entered a few moments later, that the room was an appropriate setting for the woman who stood at the window looking out into the street, one arm holding back the heavy curtain and showing round and white against the dark velvet.

"Ah," she exclaimed softly, turning from the window, "you have come. I was watching for you."

"I am not late," he said, taking her outstretched

hand. "I lingered on the doorstep until my watch crawled round to ten. How slowly it moved! But it was the appointed hour, so I waited for it."

"And I," she said, "waited also."

"Tell me," he said eagerly, "are you glad to see me? Am I, for once, welcome? Let me look into your eyes and read my answer there. They are such truthful eyes—I doubt if they could lie."

But as he bent over her the dark lashes were lowered instinctively.

"I *wanted* you to come," she whispered, "I—wanted you."

"Little hands," he said, drawing her towards him, "little hands! See how easily I hold them both in one of mine."

"Come," she said, gently withdrawing them, "let us be comfortable. Talk to me, say pleasant things. I want to be diverted to-night."

She seated herself beside the fire and the Russian leaned over the back of her chair, his eyes alight with that other fire which of late had often smouldered there.

"So you were watching for me," he said—"for me."

"I have watched for you before, Count—often."

"To-night," he continued, his breath stirring the hair about her ears, "to-night, this one hour, is *mine*. You are not Mrs. Redmond, you are not Estelle St. John, you are the Countess Valdmir."

"The Countess Valdmir," she repeated; "and do you love her—your Countess? Is she more to you than anything in life?"

"In life or death, Estelle. Ah, you frown. May I not call my Countess by her name?"

"By any name to-night."

"I have waited," he said eagerly, "I have been patient, and at last I have my reward. See, your color varies. It is your heart, and to-night it throbs for me."

"For you," she said, "for you—to-night."

"In Russia," he continued, "I have estates where I am unquestioned master, but the castles beyond the steppes have no mistress and I have no home. Very soon I shall be recalled, for my mission is drawing to a close."

He paused and knelt upon the tiger-skin rug beside her.

"I do not wish to return alone," he said slowly.

A hot, red flush stained her face and breast, faded and left her white and trembling.

"Hush!" she exclaimed, "hush!"

"I want you," he resumed. "More than anything in heaven or earth, I want you."

"More than fame?" she interrupted. "More than official honor? More than the glory of court life—the friendship of the Czar?"

"More than life itself," he replied quickly, "and I mean to have you, Star of the World."

"Don't," she said, her brow contracting, "don't."

"The old name is painful, then? Listen, Estelle, I can make you happy? From me you have nothing to conceal; no secret to eat away your heart; no spectre of the past to shadow you. Together we would bury it; together begin a new life——"

"You are strong," she interrupted, her eyes fixed on the little French clock on the mantel, "and we are weak sometimes, we women. We need support."

"And I can love," he said impetuously, "ah, what would I not do for the woman who returned that love?"

The fire blazed up brightly and the little clock ticked hurriedly, as though, indeed, it were working against time.

"What would you do for her?" she whispered, leaning towards him, "tell me, what would you do if she loved you? If she went back to Russia with you, to the castles beyond the steppes?"

"Home," he said softly, "home, Estelle."

"What would you do for her?" she persisted. "Would you give up for her sake all that you have been at so much trouble to procure? Would you return to Russia an acknowledged failure? A test, Count, a test. Would your love survive it?"

Count Valdmir sprang to his feet and walked hurriedly up and down the room; Mrs. Redmond rose also and stood watching him, her figure tense and rigid and her fingers tightly interlaced.

"The price is high," he said, pausing before her, "very high."

She straightened herself suddenly and moved a step or two towards him. The loose lace sleeves fell away from the white arms and the small head with its weight of dark hair was held proudly erect, as though conscious of its value.

"The price is high," he repeated, his eyes upon the figure before him.

"Well," she said haughtily, "what of that? Am I not worth it?"

The diamonds about her throat shot forth a hundred rays and the opal pendant gleamed scarlet as it caught the light.

"Worth it?" he cried passionately. "Ay, that and more—much more."

And the little clock upon the mantel struck eleven sharply, as though glad to have it over with.

"The time is up," she said; "your hour, Count, has ended."

"But my life has just begun," he answered; "there are details to arrange—much to discuss. When may I see you again? Estelle, I want to say good-night."

He put his arm about her waist and drew her gently towards him.

"Your lips," he said, "are mine."

With a swift, unexpected movement she slipped away from him.

"You are too late, Count, too late. Your hour has passed and you must go. Another time——"

Count Valdmir's face darkened and his brows contracted.

"It is my right," he said.

"Not yet," she replied breathlessly, "your privilege, perhaps, if I chose to grant it, but not yet your right, Count Valdmir."

He turned towards the door, white and angry.

"I shall not ask the privilege again," he said shortly, "it waits you at my rooms. I also have my price. I do not desire to give all and receive nothing."

"Ah," she said, holding out her hand appealingly, "do not go away angry. If I have hurt you, I am sorry. I will see you again, but now the time passes quickly. It is not safe for you to stay. I will let you know when next you may come and we will talk over our plans and my—request. It is the only stipulation I shall make."

Count Valdmir's eyes narrowed as he grasped her hand almost roughly.

"If you want me," he said brusquely, "you must

come to me—do you understand? I also can stipulate. I am not a safe plaything for a woman unless she proves herself sincere."

"And if she proves it, Count, to your satisfaction? If she puts aside the convenances and comes at your bidding,—comes to you gladly, as *her* privilege and your right,—what then?"

"Then," he said softly, "ah, then, Estelle, she has but to request. There is nothing I will not do."

The blazing log smouldered and fell apart, sending a shower of sparks upward to mark its dissolution.

"You will tell me," he said, bending towards her, "when I may expect——

"The Countess Valdmir," she finished softly.

XXV

THE row of carriages lined up against the curbstone indicated to the world at large that it was Friday afternoon and Mrs. Chesley was, according to custom, "at home." There had been many visitors, chiefly feminine, and much conversation of a spasmodic and desultory nature had been conducted over the teacups and beneath waving plumes. The Senator was wont to say (with an apology for the pun) that the sounds which emanated from the crowded rooms during these receptions rendered the Byrd house on K Street not unlike the bird-house at the Zoo, a remark his sister received with the silent contempt it deserved.

Isabel, presiding at the tea-table, distinctly sulked. The same people, she reflected morosely, had visited them almost every Friday that winter and said the same things; also on the other five days of the week she was apt to encounter them elsewhere and exchange similar remarks. And she actually remembered having enjoyed it and entered keenly into the whirl of engagements which always presented themselves during the season, and which seemed so tiresome to-day. She wondered if she could be growing old; had she not that morning discovered one gray hair?—a discovery bringing as much depression in its wake as though she had found it necessary to assume a wig. As a matter of fact, she had not yet quite recovered her poise since her outburst a few

evenings previous and was inclined to consider the world flat, stale, and unprofitable, and herself a much injured damsel for having to reside therein.

She therefore returned Monsieur du Pré's civilities so abstractedly that the little Frenchman mentally deplored the absence of *aplomb* in the American girl and sought relief elsewhere. Isabel enjoyed one portion of the afternoon only, and this was when Mr. Rivers hovered on the outskirts of the crowd waiting an opportunity to approach. At this time she was apparently absorbed in her duties with the teacups and handed Lyndhurst the sugar with a glance and smile which caused that young Attaché to believe himself supplied with nectar.

The Member of Congress shrugged his shoulders and walked away. He was quite conscious that the dimples brought to bear on Lyndhurst were displayed for his especial benefit, and determined to surprise her by making no further effort to secure a word for himself. And Miss Byrd was surprised and somewhat chagrined; she had expected a different result when she saw him enter, and had anticipated bestowing upon her recreant lover the slight nod and frosty smile which would convey to him the fact that he was still unforgiven.

Rivers took his departure as soon as possible, blandly smiling without and hotly raging within. He had not enjoyed recently receiving a package containing the gifts he had bestowed upon his fiancée; nor had he relished the curt "Not at home" which had baffled his attempt to see her, and the return of his letter unopened. These were slights which the popular and rising young politician felt to be undeserved, he therefore determined that the next advance should come from Isabel, and he would graciously respond. He entertained

no real doubt that sooner or later she would make this advance. Was he not the most desirable *parti* in Washington? Meanwhile, the girl deserved a lesson, and he resolved upon a wholesome course of indifference and neglect, which, experience had taught him, was often efficacious in such cases.

So the desirable *parti* betook himself to the Metropolitan Club and sat down ostensibly to read the evening paper, but in reality to reflect. He was about to make a move in the game of politics which demanded delicacy of touch and careful manipulation, and which would, he believed, give him command of the situation; it therefore required thoughtful attention. There was another matter, however, of less importance which interfered with its calm consideration by continually rising uppermost in his mind and in refusing to be ignored.

By some unfortunate chance he had lost the ring Isabel had so contemptuously returned him and which he had carried afterwards in his waistcoat pocket. Of course, it could be duplicated, although the stone was of great value. It was not the necessity of buying another which disturbed the Hon. Charles Rivers, for he was generously disposed; it was the fact that the missing ring was marked with their joint initials and a date. Also, he had good reason to believe it had dropped from his pocket during his New Year's visit to the Octagon House, and was apprehensive lest it be found there and advertised in the daily papers, with full accompanying description for Isabel or her father to read and recognize. It was all most annoying, but he believed the best solution was to immediately order a duplicate, which could be produced by him if necessary.

Meanwhile, Lyndhurst had also brought his visit to a termination and walked slowly to his rooms absorbed in thought.

He had in his pocket the report of the Secret Service man he had employed to trace Colonel St. John, and this report contained singularly disquieting information. He remembered it word for word.

"Colonel St. John, *alias* William Lewis, *alias* Joseph Sanders. Present residence, Washington. Present occupation, viz.:

"As Colonel St. John, conducts gambling-house at Jackson City.

"As Joseph Sanders, employed as watchman in the State Department.

"As William Lewis, janitor of the Octagon House, Eighteenth Street and New York Avenue.

"Sometimes visited at latter place by one gentleman after nightfall; once visited by a lady. Followed on New Year's Day to the reception given by the Secretary of State; followed the same evening to the apartments of Count Alexis Valdmir, attaché Russian Legation."

Thus read the report, and he repeated it as he walked along. Well, he had traced his man at last; he had but to say the word and Colonel St. John's days of liberty were at an end. Still, he hesitated unaccountably. There had been unexpected developments and certain complications had arisen unknown to the Secret Service, perhaps, but painfully obtrusive nevertheless.

Again and again Lyndhurst put two and two together and compared the result. It was an unpleasant total, taking it all in all, and he told himself disgustedly that he'd be hanged if he understood it.

How did Colonel St. John, notorious blackleg that he was, secure a position under the United States Government?

Why should he present himself as a guest at the home of the Secretary of State, and why should Mrs. Redmond appear disconcerted upon perceiving him?

¡What connection had he with Count Valdmir?

Colonel St. John, of Berlin, was well known to possess a daughter. Colonel St. John, of Washington, was apparently childless. ¡Where was his daughter?

At this point Lyndhurst abruptly checked his train of thought, only to encounter fresh perplexities and a new series of questions admitting of no satisfactory reply.

He recalled his first visit to the Octagon House and the bit of blue gauze he had found there, which now reposed in his card-case and seemed to him strangely like the gown Miss Byrd had worn the evening he had discovered the wet spot on her skirt and been informed of her engagement; also the footprints in the snow in the old garden when he had reconnoitred on Christmas Day. What did it all mean?

A sudden recollection of the Khedive's opals flashed before him, and he paused hopelessly.

"It's too deep for me," he ejaculated aloud, his hands thrust into his coat-pocket and his hat pulled well down over his eyes.

Should he have Colonel St. John arrested at once, or should he wait for an answer to the letter he had sent to Berlin? He thought the arrest should be made immediately and the matter done with.

Suddenly out of the dusk two reproachful blue eyes assailed him, tearful, appealing, and withal a little frightened. Colonel St. John was reprieved for the time being.

Again recalling the footprints, Lyndhurst instinctively turned down the alley leading to the old garden

and crossed the gap in the wall. The snow of Christmas had melted and been replaced by a slight covering to-day, so the garden glistened white and spotless as the Englishman crossed it and approached the house. He scarcely knew why he went, for it formed no part of his plan to encounter his foe single-handed; he knew too well the desperate fight of cornered beasts to attempt it.

Far up in the top of the old house a ray of light shone out from a chink in the broken shutter. So the caretaker was at home. He paused and looked at it long and earnestly.

As he gazed the indecision of the moment vanished, leaving in its place a grim determination and a burning thirst for revenge. Washington faded, and in its place arose Berlin and the costly establishment of the gambler. He saw his cousin's frank, boyish face and the eagerness with which he had entered upon his first important work; he saw the same face cold in death with the nasty hole in the temple, and heard his sister's voice as she clung to him with trembling lips and tear-dimmed eyes.

"It can't be true, Cecil, it can't be true. *Bertie could not have done it.*"

The blue eyes appeared again, but without avail, for Lyndhurst remembered the misery in the gray eyes at home and swore softly as he recalled them.

"As ye sow, so shall ye reap," he said aloud as the desire for justice overpowered him. He would quietly make sure Colonel St. John was at home, then he would himself return with the police. The affair should be settled once for all; he would not hesitate, no matter who was involved. He repeated it quite fiercely to him-

self as he opened the insecure latch of the old back door and entered the hall, dark with the early dusk of the winter's day.

"*No matter who is involved.*"

The Englishman was troubled by no fears of the supernatural as he swiftly ascended the stairs towards that upper light. He was only conscious of the sportsman's desire for a look at his prey safe in its lair before taking the decisive step of its capture, so he walked as softly as possible and reached the landing unmolested.

The janitor's door was slightly ajar. The lock had become difficult to manage since Mr. Rivers's visit. Colonel St. John had observed it apprehensively that very evening, and intended to provide himself with a bolt as soon as possible. To-night, however, the door swung partly open and Lyndhurst looked expectantly inside, but the room was empty, the dim light coming from an inner door. Colonel St. John was on duty to-night as watchman and had left some time before, but Lyndhurst, ignorant of this fact, hesitated on the landing, undecided whether to retreat or advance, being alone and unarmed.

As he paused uncertainly a sound from the inner room arrested his attention. It was the restless movement of an uneasy body, and he involuntarily stepped inside the door as a voice, thick with fever, uttered a familiar name.

"Senator Byrd," it said, as though reading aloud, "announces the engagement of his daughter Isabel to the Hon. Charles Rivers, Member of Congress from Virginia."

A moment's pause, and the sentence was repeated with parrot-like accurateness.

Lyndhurst hesitated no longer, but followed the example of Mr. Rivers and advanced to the inner room.

The light that had attracted him emanated from the kerosene stove which stood upon the floor at some distance from the cot and fell but dimly upon the muttering figure. The Englishman, however, knelt beside it and scrutinized the flushed face gravely.

"Leigh!" he exclaimed in astonishment, "David Leigh—the private secretary!"

Leigh raised himself upon his elbow and fixed his burning eyes upon his companion's face.

"I know where they went," he said in a hoarse whisper, "the Roostchook papers, but I'll never, never tell!"

"By Jove!" ejaculated the Englishman, in great perplexity, "by Jove!"

Glancing helplessly about the little room, his eye was attracted by a brilliant ray of light from a crack in the board beside the cot. Instinctively he put out his hand; it proved to be a ring. Lyndhurst carried it to the oil-stove and examined it. In a moment Colonel St. John, David Leigh, and the object of his visit were forgotten, for he recognized the slender rim of gold supporting one large diamond. Had he not regretfully watched it flash on a certain white hand only recently? It did not need the initials inside, "I. H. B. from C. R.," and the date engraved to tell him where it belonged. The lights from the diamond scorched the hand which held it, and the young Attaché's face was very grave as he placed the ring in his card-case beside the bit of blue gauze and turned again to the figure on the floor.

How did he get there? What did it all mean? Leigh was very ill and quite delirious, that was evident. Lynd-

hurst was, of course, ignorant of his mysterious disappearance, as well as of the loss of the Roostchook papers, but as he looked at the young fellow, restless and suffering, his face hardened ominously.

"More foul play," he said aloud.

"His daughter Isabel," repeated Leigh huskily, "his daughter Isabel. Don't ask me about the Roostchook papers. I know—I know."

And Lyndhurst, with the sensation of an unwitting eavesdropper, hurriedly retreated.

He felt confident there was black dealing somewhere, and at once started to inform the police. As he reached the street he paused again.

"Justice," he said sternly, "justice, whomever it may involve."

And the rays from the diamond in his pocket burned through the card-case and into his heart.

Well, it would all be over soon. Colonel St. John should be arrested to-night, Leigh removed to a hospital, and his friends notified. By the way, who were his friends? The Englishman did not know. Whom, then, should he inform?

An officer approached and looked curiously at him, but Lyndhurst hastened on as though he himself were within reach of the arm of the law, and breathed a sigh of relief as the man turned the corner without a backward glance.

Again he was in Berlin, paying such of Hertford's debts as money could obliterate and packing his effects to ship home, along with his body. Lyndhurst shuddered; it had been a bitter period of his existence. He remembered the boy's rooms, the furniture, papers, pictures—the sketch, "Star of the World."

It hung beside the chimney, exactly within range of the eye from the easychair before the fire. His sister's picture in its silver frame stood upon the dressing-table, but Evelyn's pretty face seemed strangely insipid when compared with the witchery of the head among the clouds. The easychair was worn from much use; it stood uncompromisingly with its face to the chimney-piece and its back to the dressing-table; Lyndhurst, sitting down in it, raised his eyes to the water-color sketch, looked a long time—and angrily, unwillingly, understood. With complete comprehension came the hot desire for revenge and the resolution to spare neither pains nor money in bringing about just retribution.

The chase had been long and wearisome. Colonel St. John and his daughter had apparently disappeared from the face of the earth, but now the end had come, suddenly, unexpectedly, with an overwhelming crash of events and a full realization of what might follow in its wake.

Again he repeated the report of the Secret Service.

"*Followed to the apartments of Count Alexis Valdmir.*"

Lyndhurst endeavored to classify his evidence and deduce the results calmly and dispassionately.

Valdmir, sent on special duty. Cold, relentless, and indefatigable, Russia's best resource in time of emergency. Valdmir in communication with Colonel St. John; Colonel St. John employed in the Department of State. David Leigh, the Secretary's secretary, delirious in the Octagon House, raving indiscriminately about Isabel Byrd and Roostchook. On the floor beside him a ring.

The wheels of his thinking mechanism seemed to pause

with a sudden snap, then slowly, painfully, revolve once more.

Valdmir had assisted Colonel St. John to depart from the New Year's reception, Mrs. Redmond——

The British Attaché felt suddenly giddy and removed his hat to allow the cold air to pass across his brow. He discovered he was in Farragut Park and sank abstractedly down upon one of the benches.

Not far distant was the British Embassy; Lyndhurst recognized its proximity and recognized also his official connection with it.

It was no part of England's policy that Russia should hold the controlling card regarding the vexed question of the Roostchook trouble. Lyndhurst had that morning been present at a long and anxious conference on the subject. Was it not his plain duty to go at once and lay his lately acquired knowledge and suspicions before his chief, to act upon as the latter thought best? First his duty to his country. The young Englishman had been well-grounded in patriotism and taught to look facts squarely in the face. It was now a matter too serious for the personal equation to be considered, and must go, he realized, to the acting head of his Government for such use as he might see fit.

"Whomever it may involve," he repeated gloomily as he rose and walked towards the Embassy.

At the iron fence before the substantial red-brick house he paused again and gazed fixedly at the lion and unicorn surmounting the stone *porte-cochère*. But instead of the emblem of his nation, Lyndhurst saw a girl's head with its background of filmy clouds. The eyes sought his, changing as he looked from blue to purple, and in them shone the innocence of girlhood as

well as the appeal of womanhood to man. Lyndhurst convulsively grasped at the iron railing.

"Drunk," said a passing young woman disgustedly, drawing back her skirts.

Again he raised his eyes to the stone-trimmed *porte-cochère*. The lion and the unicorn now stood erect and rampant in their struggle for the crown, but the scion of their nation turned his back upon them and walked briskly towards Farragut Square and up the broad stone steps of a house near by. Here he paused and, taking out his card, wrote a few words upon it, unconscious that a carriage had stopped before the door.

"Will you give this card to Mrs. Redmond?" he said to the servant who responded to his ring.

The man stood back respectfully.

"Mrs. Redmond is just returning, sir," he said.

She came slowly up the steps towards him and paused a moment in surprised recognition.

"I am just back from a round of visits, with barely time to dress for dinner," she remarked lightly.

The Englishman bent forward and said a few words in an undertone.

"Come in," said Mrs. Redmond hastily,—"yes, certainly, Mr. Lyndhurst, I understand. James, I do not wish to be disturbed."

Lyndhurst followed her into the brightly lighted hall, and James closed the heavy door with unmistakable decision.

XXVI

THE Secretary sat alone in his library watching the firelight play across the open letter in his hand.

Into every life come moments when we pause and review the past. We trace, step by step, our progress up or down, as the case may be. We say to ourselves dejectedly, "If I had only done thus or so it might have been different," and long to go back and do it over again, for we are now older, wiser, and more careful, if less confident and joyous.

These moments are no respecters of persons; they come unsought to the systematically fortunate as well as the perpetually unfortunate. They are blessed indeed who have eaten the apple of life and found no bitter taste about the core.

The Secretary moved slightly, and the paper rustled in his fingers. Instinctively he raised it and read it slowly, with the careful attention one should accord an autograph letter from the President. It was a cordial epistle, expressing great personal regard and much appreciation of his services, but it was the concluding paragraph to which he returned, scanning it word for word, as though it were not already permanently engraved upon his memory.

"It has been with sincere regret that I have for some time observed the gradual failing of your health, due no doubt to the heavy responsibilities you have been called upon to undergo. It is only young shoulders that can stand erect beneath the official

burden. Of late this has caused me serious apprehension, so much so that I feel it incumbent upon me to write and remonstrate against this needless sacrifice on your part. You have surely earned a long rest. Why not take it?"

"Why not take it?" repeated the Secretary gravely.

Well, he was tired, that was true enough. He had served his country to the best of his ability, and guided the ship of state safely, so far, through some rather deep and turbulent waters. Was his grasp upon the helm becoming insecure?

He remembered the trouble in Ecuador, the crisis in Brazil. Now it was Roostchook. He also recalled the hesitation with which he had accepted the Portfolio of State and the insistence of the President.

"I must have at the head of the Cabinet," he had said, "a man of ability, in sympathy with the Administration. For my own pleasure I want him to be congenial and well known to me. For the sake of our old friendship, as well as for political reasons, I beg you not to refuse to accept the billet."

The Secretary's chin dropped forward on his breast, his hand clinched, crushing into a tight ball the sheet of white paper with its blue heading of "Executive Mansion" as he sat motionless while the moments passed unnoticed. Finally he rose and went to his desk.

"I should have done it myself," he murmured as he took up a pen; "he might have waited a little longer."

The Secretary was indeed tasting the bitterness of the apple.

Meanwhile a subdued bustle had arisen in the hall without, accompanied by a ringing of bells and a general air of suppressed excitement. Mrs. Redmond issued

hurried but emphatic directions which the servants hastened to obey, wondering greatly, while Lyndhurst stood, hat in hand, in the drawing-room waiting to depart.

"Would not a hospital be better?" he suggested as Mrs. Redmond turned from an interview with the housekeeper.

"Oh, no," she said positively, "he must be brought here at once. Mr. Redmond would wish it, I am sure. We are indebted to you, Mr. Lyndhurst, for letting us know so promptly. Mr. Leigh's unexplained absence from the Department has caused my husband great anxiety."

Lyndhurst hesitated perceptibly; he had more to say and scarcely knew how to say it.

"I ought to tell you," he began, "why I was looking around the Octagon House to-night."

"No," she replied quickly, "don't. It is not necessary—and I do not wish to know."

"Mrs. Redmond," said the young Attaché suddenly, "I—well, there is something else. You are Miss Byrd's friend, are you not—her closest friend?"

"Her friendship is one of my pleasures, Mr. Lyndhurst."

He produced his card-case and opened it.

"On the floor," he said reluctantly, "beside Leigh, I found this."

Mrs. Redmond uttered a surprised exclamation and held out her hand for the ring.

"You think," he said anxiously, "that it is surely hers? There might be some mistake, some strange coincidence. Such things do happen."

But Mrs. Redmond shook her head gravely.

"There is no mistake, I am too familiar with it. See,

the claw of the setting is bent slightly. Isabel's ring—how very strange!"

"I thought," he said, his eyes upon his hat, "that perhaps, as you are her friend, you might return it without telling her who found it. No doubt she is anxious over its loss."

Mrs. Redmond was turning the ring over in her hand with a puzzled expression, and made no reply. She had that afternoon stopped at Senator Byrd's and received a hurried confidence from Isabel over which she had rejoiced openly.

"The carriage is ready," announced James at the door, and she roused herself abruptly.

"You are very good to trouble yourself about this," she said gratefully. "I had them telephone for everything necessary. The doctor and nurse will meet you here and everything will be ready. As to the ring—well, I will return it, and I am quite sure, Mr. Lyndhurst, that Miss Byrd will be as surprised as ourselves to learn where it was found."

She extended her hand, and Lyndhurst took it quietly in his.

"Mrs. Redmond," he said earnestly, "if I can ever be of any real service to you, believe me, I shall be very glad to do what I can."

She did not reply, and he continued:

"I'm rather a bungling fellow, you know, and sometimes I run plump into things I had much better keep clear of. The only thing I can do then is to back out and say nothing, but I can always be depended upon to do that—I'm rather an expert in keeping quiet and attending to my own affairs only, you know. It's quite a hobby with me, but if at any time——"

He hesitated, uncertain how to proceed, as he felt the hand in his grow cold to the finger-tips.

"Thank you," she said almost inaudibly, "I shall remember."

He turned aside, hot and uncomfortable, and with an incoherent remark about a speedy return with his patient beat a hasty retreat into the hall. His self-imposed task had grown most difficult of achievement, and he felt the conviction forced unwillingly upon him that Colonel St. John was indefinitely reprieved as far as he was concerned; also that he would have no report to submit to his chief upon the all-absorbing Roostchook question.

Lyndhurst felt for a cigar and repressed an inclination to swear. He cordially detested periods of indecision, and heretofore had not encountered many of them during his career; he also detested becoming involved in the affairs of others, but, he reflected gloomily as he approached the Octagon House, he seemed to be in for it this time.

The Secretary, bending over his desk in the library, heard the front-door close without interest. He wrote and rewrote, copied and revised, and at last put aside his pen and looked at the result of his labors. Mrs. Redmond entered quietly, laid her hand upon his shoulder, and looked also, her blue eyes clouding and her lips compressed.

"I have the honor to tender my resignation as the Secretary of State, to take effect upon the first proximo, and to request that it be accepted without delay.

"In taking this step I am actuated by a desire to preserve the efficiency of the Department and to further the interests of the Government in the present emergency.

"I beg to express my thanks for the honor conferred upon me by being selected as the head of your Cabinet and for the confidence reposed in me in the past.

"With the hope that I may receive a speedy acceptance of my resignation, I remain,

"Your obedient servant,

"JOHN REDMOND."

The Secretary looked at his wife and smiled.

"To-morrow," he said, "I will take this to the Department and have it put in official shape. Don't be distressed, dear. It's all for the best."

But Mrs. Redmond pushed the paper aside impatiently.

"John," she said with an odd little laugh, "you must not do this, and you won't want to any more. He is found—Mr. Leigh is found, and I'm having him brought here."

"Found," he repeated, "found? Where, Estelle? I don't think I understand."

"He's ill, John—very ill. Mr. Lyndhurst discovered him in an empty house. I saw him this afternoon,—Mr. Lyndhurst, I mean,—and he told me. I don't quite understand myself, but I gave orders for Mr. Leigh to be brought here at once because I thought you would wish it."

"Yes," returned the Secretary, anxiously, "of course. But——"

"I've had the blue room arranged for him," she interrupted, "and telephoned for a nurse to be sent at once. We must do all we can. And this"—she touched the paper on the desk—"can go into the fire, for the present at least."

The Secretary's fingers tightened about that other

paper compressed into such small compass, and he laid a detaining hand upon the draft of his resignation.

"No, dear," he said, "it goes to the President. Under any circumstances, it goes to the President."

Mrs. Redmond leaned over her husband and slipped her arm about his neck.

"Ah, John, don't," she whispered, "wait a day or two. It's all coming right. For my sake,—for your own sake,—wait a little."

But Mr. Redmond had arrived at a decision while he sat alone in the library, reviewing the past.

"It goes to-morrow," he said gently. "I'm sorry you care so much, my dear, but it goes."

She gave an inarticulate little cry and sank on her knees beside the chair.

"Why, Estelle," he said gravely, "Estelle."

"John," she said, taking his face between her hands and gazing earnestly into his eyes, "you love me, don't you? And—and *trust* me too? Isn't it so?"

"You know it, dear, why ask me?"

"I'm asking you to prove your love. I've never made a point of anything since we've been married, but now I ask you, *beg* you,—see, John, I, your wife, am on my knees to you,—I beg you to wait—not to send in that resignation."

"I do not understand you to-night, Estelle."

"It's because I have only lately learned what it means to you," she continued hurriedly. "I've only just realized how things could reflect on your honor—but I know now, I *know*. I've seen you grow old and ill under the strain and I can't bear it—I can't bear it. Something must happen—Mr. Leigh is found, you know. Wait a day or two longer. Don't resign to-morrow,

dear. For your own sake, for my sake, *don't*, John—for my sake."

He did not reply, and she paused a moment, then resumed breathlessly.

"Just two or three days. That's all I ask. Wait that long. If you love me, wait that long."

The Secretary put his arm about his wife and raised her gently.

"I do not like to see you there, my dear," he said, "it is not fitting. You are strangely excited; your hands are cold and your face is flushed. Tell me why this is such a vital matter to you. I thought you would be glad to go abroad, where we could be together all the time. You have often said you wished I would leave politics."

"But not this way," she interrupted. "Not this way. I only want you to wait until you are vindicated —until they *want* you to stay. Something will happen, I—I *feel* it. Oh, it's not much I ask,—two or three days,—a week at the longest. Oh John, dearest, to please me."

"Listen, Estelle," he said gravely, "since you make such a point of it I will, much against my better judgment, delay a few days, but certainly no longer than a week."

The Secretary's mouth set in a hard, straight line, and he squared his shoulders as he laid a crushed ball of paper upon the draft of his resignation.

"At the end of that time," he said firmly, "it goes to the President. Whatever happens,—and under any circumstances,—it *goes*. Now let us change the subject. I want to understand more fully about Mr. Leigh."

She gave a relieved sigh, taking his hand in both of hers and resting her face against it.

"Oh, you're *good*," she murmured, "so good. And you won't be sorry. I have an intuition, dear—women do sometimes, you know. That's why I was so insistent. I didn't want you to leave under a cloud—that's what you called it the other night, isn't it? But it's lifting—the cloud is lifting. It's very black now, but behind it the sky is clear. Oh John——"

And with a sudden collapse of overwrought nerves Mrs. Redmond laid her head upon the desk and gave way to a paroxysm of tears. Sorely puzzled and withal a little anxious, the Secretary put his arms about her and drew her to the large chair beside the fire.

"Don't, sweetheart," he said, unfastening with gentle fingers the plumed hat she had forgotten to remove, "don't. Why, the whole thing is not worth a tear from you. You are tired and nervous, I think, and no wonder. Don't cry; it hurts me."

"John," she said brokenly, her face hidden on his shoulder, "do you think you would love and trust me under any and all circumstances?"

"Under any and all circumstances, Estelle."

"Because I may put you to the test. Don't ask me what I mean—I don't think I know. I *am* tired and nervous too, I suppose, but I've got lots to do, John,—hard work,—and when it's done I'll rest. We'll both rest. I hear wheels stopping at the door, don't you? It's Mr. Leigh; we must go out and see to him. And I'm foolish, John—don't worry about me. Kiss me. Now we'll go to Mr. Leigh."

XXVII

LYNDHURST had faithfully discharged his errand. He had seen Leigh carried bodily downstairs, mattress and all, by the Redmond servants without rousing from the deep sleep into which he had sunk, and had felt thankful to the early darkness of the winter's night and the seclusion of the Octagon House, which combined to prevent the accumulation of the curious crowd usually inseparable from such occasions. To the wondering servants he volunteered no explanation whatever, and devoted his energies to supporting his companion on the wide back seat of the brougham.

"Put the mattress inside the door and go home; drive carefully," he directed with a sigh of relief at the absence of an inconvenient policeman of an inquiring turn of mind.

Leigh slept heavily. Indeed, he seemed to be in a stupor from which he could not be awakened. The Englishman anxiously touched his pulse and thanked Heaven his own responsibility would soon cease.

He saw Leigh carried up the broad stairway of the Redmond house, followed by the doctor and a white-capped nurse, who waited to receive them, and found himself entering into a halting explanation to Mr. Redmond of how he happened to be near the Octagon House, was attracted by the muttering of Leigh in his delirium, and at once investigated, being interested in ferreting

out sounds attributed to the supernatural, and curious regarding the legends of the old house. He grew quite fluent towards the latter part of his story and brought himself to an abrupt pause, conscious that the Secretary was listening with a puzzled air and an expression of surprised incredulity.

Lyndhurst suddenly remembered he had forgotten dinner and that the evening was well advanced, and, remarking that he would look in later to hear the report of the doctor, beat a hasty retreat.

It was a fact worthy of comment that when he returned to his rooms he avoided passing the British Legation; he believed the lion and the unicorn would look reproachfully down upon him and felt he deserved their contempt.

"So much for prying into your neighbors' back doors," he remarked grimly to a friendly lamp-post as he stopped to light his cigar.

Meanwhile Mrs. Redmond waited the verdict of the doctor. The Secretary, after a moment's hesitation, had followed the patient upstairs, so she sat alone in the brightly lighted hall, reviewing the events of the day.

Events seemed to be crowding upon one another with bewildering swiftness of late, and there was a decided uncertainty as to what the next revolution of the wheel of fate might bring forth. Estelle caught her breath as she reflected upon the helplessness of humanity when their garments catch upon its cogs, and she knew that with the flowing draperies of woman escape is particularly difficult. Indeed, it sometimes seems as though the civilized world were determined to shield and protect its masculine element, even in the fashion of their raiment.

She sat in the large, carved chair from which she had invited Count Valdmir to be her guest on New Year's night. Was it only yesterday? It seemed to her ages had come and gone since then. The very griffins carved upon its arms suggested the handsome face of the Russian, and the surrounding air was filled with echoes of his voice.

"A week," she said aloud, "only a week, seven days. But—it's got to be done somehow."

There was a movement in the hall upstairs; a servant was summoned and hastily dispatched to the nearest drug-store, and quiet was again restored.

Mrs. Redmond put her hands upon the arms of the chair as though to hide the griffins' heads and thought of her interview with Lyndhurst. So he knew. What ultimate use would he make of his knowledge?

Colonel St. John's daughter believed she realized the implacability of his nature, but Mrs. Redmond involuntarily trusted in the chivalry of his manhood.

She heard the doctor, in the upper hall, say something in a low voice and her husband's quiet reply. In another moment they might come downstairs. Could she pull herself together and talk to them naturally? For an instant surrounding objects blurred and the walls leaned towards each other; then gradually furniture and bric-a-brac separated, and the walls resumed their former upright position. Air—she must have air.

Catching up the fur-lined cloak she had flung aside upon her return a few hours previous she went out on the doorstep and leaned against the stone framework, her cheek pressed against its rough surface.

"I must think," she said as the cool wind drove away the faintness and brought a trace of color to her

face; "it takes a lot of thinking, but after awhile it will come to me. It's got to be done—I see it quite plainly."

The street-lamps shone dimly and the stars overhead displayed shining points of light against the dark background of the sky. Carriages and pedestrians hurried along, bent on reaching their destination as speedily as possible, and the quiet of the early evening descended upon the city. After awhile, some hours later, the avocations of the night would commence and parts of Washington, at least, would be far from peaceful.

Estelle pressed her face closer to the hard stone and looked from the stars to the street below.

"The debt is mine," she said slowly, "*mine*—and I must pay the price."

A man and woman approached. She, resplendent as to hat and feathers, dragging her tawdry skirts along the pavement to conceal defective shoes; he, with hands thrust deep in his pockets and hat well down over his eyes to conceal his identity. Just opposite the house she laid her hand, in its torn and dirty white glove, upon his arm and spoke earnestly, the painted face beneath the draggled feathers raised appealingly. With a muttered oath he shook off the hand as though fearing contamination from her touch.

"Drop your whining!" he commanded. "Don't you know it's all past and over?"

She made a low-voiced reply and he impatiently pulled out his purse.

"There," he said, rapidly selecting a note, "I want to see no more of you. Is a man never to be free from a millstone about his neck? Here, take it, and go back where you belong."

"Where I belong?" she cried sharply; "yes, and who sent me there, who——"

They passed out of hearing and faded away in the distance, he striding along in front, she following dejectedly a few feet in the rear. Night had begun already.

Mrs. Redmond shivered as she went back into the radiance and warmth of the hall. She had looked with unwilling eyes into a dangerous abyss of darkness and felt an irresistible desire for light and safety.

At the foot of the stairs her husband stood in earnest consultation with the doctor.

"A blow on the back of the head," the physician was saying, "resulting in concussion. The danger lies in the abnormally high temperature. The case bears investigation, Mr. Redmond. With your permission I shall report it to the police."

"Certainly," said the Secretary promptly, "the sooner the better. I will offer a liberal reward for the capture of the man who dealt the blow. Mr. Leigh is my private secretary and an uncommonly fine young fellow. I have a great personal regard for him and interest in his welfare."

The doctor thoughtfully drew on his gloves.

"The Octagon House, I think you said," he remarked slowly; "a very strange case. Pity he is unable to throw any light on it himself, but, of course, that is out of the question for the present; perhaps he may be able to talk a bit in a day or two, however, and it might be well to delay informing the police for a little. Well, I must be off. The nurse is entirely competent, the best on my list; it's lucky she was at leisure, for he needs skilled attention. I'll look in again later on. Mrs. Red-

mond need feel no responsibility in the matter; Miss Gray has my instructions, and, as I said, she is very efficient. Good-night."

"John," said Mrs. Redmond as the door closed, "will the police be notified to-night?"

He replied absently that he hardly thought so, but was not sure.

"And," she continued, "they will search the Octagon House—set some one to watch it, perhaps?"

"Dinner is served," said James, appearing at the door with a long-suffering expression of countenance. It was the third time that night he had made the announcement, and as yet no one had responded.

The Secretary put his arm about his wife.

"Come, dear," he said gently, "you need your dinner and so do I. We are both tired, I think."

* * * * * * *

In the blue room the nurse stood beside the bed and gazed at her patient. Up to the present time she had been too busy for more than a hasty pause of surprise when the light first fell upon his face; now, however, had come a lull in active operations and she could collect her thoughts.

She had grown accustomed to emergency cases and had responded promptly when summoned, although very tired and sorely in need of a few days' rest, and she experienced a decided thrill of gratification when the doctor in a few hasty words expressed his satisfaction that she was at leisure.

"For you know, Miss Gray, we have a tough job before us for a few days at least; after that it ought to be plain sailing. But together we'll pull him through,

I hope. Fine-looking young chap, isn't he? I'll drop in again to-night. Meanwhile watch the temperature; it ought to fall somewhat shortly, and it *must not* rise."

Mary Gray knew that her profession was apt to bring her in constant contact with the unexpected, but as she looked at the face upon the pillow she experienced a moment of incredulous astonishment.

David Leigh at Mrs. Colson's had insensibly attracted her. His frank, hearty manner and laughing blue eyes, as well as the air of good-fellowship with the world in general, had appealed to the girl already weary of the struggle for existence, although his exuberant health and spirits had rather overpowered her.

Mary shaded the light and turned to collect the garments scattered about the room. As she folded the coat, giving a little shake to free it from the dust, something fell from an inside pocket and she stooped and picked it up. Was it necessary for her to remove everything from his pockets, she wondered, as well as the purse the doctor had laid on the dressing-table.

She held the long envelope in her hand, oppressed with the sense of something strangely familiar in the surrounding atmosphere. Her patient's condition demanded her undivided attention. Why, then, should she be able to think only of her sister? Why should Christine's laces, ribbons, and various unimportant articles of apparel be uppermost in her mind?

Leigh stirred uneasily, but she stood absorbed, his coat over her arm and the hand holding the papers hanging listlessly at her side. Suddenly she raised the envelope, looked at it with startled eyes, and held it to her nose. Yes, it was there. The subtle, penetrating odor which Christine loved and she considered sicken-

ing; the curious mixture of sachet powders the younger girl had learned from an old Frenchwoman, and in the possession of which secret she exulted openly, triumphing in the individuality of her perfume.

Mary felt in the coat-pocket and drew out a handkerchief. It was possible the Frenchwoman had given her receipt to more than one person. The handkerchief, however, was guiltless of scent of any kind, and she returned it regretfully.

Why did the envelope seem familiar? She bent over it and laboriously examined the one word, blurred and indistinct.

"R-o-o——"

Suddenly she paused. She remembered the night of Mr. Marks's first visit to Christine, the white hyacinths and the package flung impatiently aside unopened after the first three letters were spelled out and never again mentioned. The nurse forgot her duty to her patient in her realization of her duty to her sister, and opened the envelope.

XXVIII

THE downward path is very easy to travel. No effort is required for steady progress, and the way is so broad and free from obstacles that insensibly the pace increases until it is impossible to halt, for one must keep moving rapidly if he would not be trampled by the feet rushing on behind.

Consequently the traveller, flying breathlessly along, arrives before he realizes it in the quicksand awaiting him at the bottom of the hill, struggles ineffectually to free himself, and looks with terrified eyes upon the ending of the road.

Colonel St. John, seated beside the watchman's table in the Department of State, felt the closing of the quicksand and knew he had reached the termination of the path. Heretofore he had successfully managed to elude justice whenever necessary, but this time he realized any effort would be futile and had not courage to attempt it.

It was very silent in the great building as he looked through the long corridor with its row of lights pendent from the ceiling, spaced, he thought, in such a manner as merely to accentuate the gloom. Here and there in the distance a lower light shone more brightly beside a watchman's table; he felt grateful for human companionship, but was not popular with his associates, and

they rarely approached him for the desultory intercourse with which they enlivened their waking hours.

Colonel St. John felt no inclination for sleep. He leaned his head against the wall and wondered idly whether he would be there another night, or whether he wold repose at the police station, or—— He did not dwell on the last thought.

By this time Count Valdmir would surely have opened the package of papers. He recalled his own sensations when he unfastened them and spread them out on the table in the Octagon House. The envelope he had pounced upon with such avidity had been filled with blank papers carefully folded and labelled.

Colonel St. John remembered how he had procured them. He had not been on duty at the Department that night, but had worked late at the Octagon House and finally started for Jackson City through the old garden, with the intention of making use of the gap in the wall. The night was cold and Jackson City seemed a long distance away, so he had fortified himself by repeated applications of his lips to a square black bottle, kept carefully concealed from inquisitive eyes in his coat-pocket.

Just at the gap in the wall he had encountered a tall figure, which seemed to his fevered imagination strangely like Lyndhurst, and Lyndhurst was hunting him as a bloodhound tracks its prey. The figure paused just inside the wall and he had instinctively stooped and picked up a brick. He saw again the red light which had leaped to his eyes and his stealthy advance with raised arm.

Colonel St. John, sick at heart in his watchman's chair, remembered the discovery that his victim was not

Lyndhurst, and the slow dragging of the inanimate form across the garden and up the stairs. He was very heavy, and the old man had been exhausted upon reaching his room. He had put the mattress from his cot on the floor in the little inner room and laid the figure on it, applying such slight remedies as he had on hand, loosened his collar, and in doing so turned back his coat. In the inside pocket was a long envelope clearly labelled "Roostchook."

A day or so passed, and the man he had hit with a brick grew feverish and restless. He understood quite clearly what might happen if he died; then had come the temptation to make use of the subterranean passage; also the memory of the Octoroon safely walled up in the cellar. Another ghost more or less would not affect the reputation of the old house.

Then he had felt the overwhelming desire to leave America. He was rich in the unexpected possession of his daughter and independent as far as money was concerned. She would, he was convinced, pay well for silence, and he could quietly depart, leaving his work for Count Valdmir unfinished.

Colonel St. John thought he understood the Russian. He had often before in his career seen a man in love with a woman, although he, himself, had never succumbed so completely as to sympathize with the situation. Then had come the suspicion that he was under surveillance, the frantic desire for immediate escape, and the attempt to pass off the blank papers on Count Valdmir. The bluff worked successfully, but he had not dared attempt to leave the city as he had planned. Sooner or later the Russian would open the package. Probably he had done so by this time, and then——

Colonel St. John moved restlessly. How still it was. He counted the black and white squares on the floor of the corridor as far as his eye could reach, and aimlessly switched on and off his light. He thought of Count Valdmir, and his hand clinched as he recalled the Russian's contemptuous attitude towards him and relentless demand for his services. Well, he had worked for his freedom. In his room at the Octagon House were piles of completed tracings showing all the outlying defences of the principal seaports of the country. Some of them had been difficult to procure, but he had finally succeeded in one way or another, and to-morrow he was to deliver them to his employer.

The moments dragged slowly. Eleven—twelve. It was a long time yet before morning; many hours in which to speculate upon the events of to-morrow and to arrange his plans for the day. Somewhere out of sight a watchman laughed, waking clamorous echoes and reverberations. Colonel St. John sprang to his feet and stood at bay, his back against the wall, then dropped weakly into his chair.

"I've gone to pieces," he muttered dejectedly, "all to pieces."

He thought suddenly of David Leigh, ill, perhaps dying, on the floor of the Octagon House. Would it be murder in the first degree? What should he do with the body? Colonel St. John gasped and loosened his collar.

An irresistible impulse led him to open the large doors and look out into the night. His post of duty had lately been changed from the second to the first floor, and he was stationed by the south entrance. The moon shone whitely, bathing Washington in its en-

chanted light, but he looked at it unmoved. He had often seen the moon before. The smoke of a train crossing the Potomac rose black against the horizon, and the old man caught his breath as he watched it fade away.

There was a chance, a mere chance. He would try it. Just as he was, hatless and without an overcoat, he would make his way to Jackson City. There was money in the box in his room there. Not much, perhaps, but it would do, and he would again evade the law. Once in a place of safety, Estelle should send him plenty more.

He looked sharply about for the shadow which had darkened his pathway of late, but observed only the shadows cast by the pillars of the portico upon which he stood. Evidently he was safe until morning at least.

With a hasty, decisive motion Colonel St. John softly closed the door of the State Department and started in the direction of the Potomac.

It was very cold. The night wind seemed to go through his bones. At the curve of the ellipse he paused; it was possible the type of cab known as night-hawk might be prowling in the vicinity. Such a cab would drive him across the river and ask no questions en route, so he looked anxiously about.

Behind him stood the Department of State, with its manifold official secrets; at his left was the White House, perhaps also containing private affairs of its own; before him flowed the Potomac, and beyond was Jackson City, both, no doubt, covering many an unknown tragedy; at his right was the street leading to the Octagon House, a short square distant, with perhaps another mystery now inside its walls.

Colonel St. John shivered from the cold within as

well as without as he looked up the silent street. Was Leigh living or dead? He had seemed to the old man very ill that night. Involuntarily he moved a few steps to the right; he wished to know what to expect.

A cloud drifted across the face of the moon, and far in the distance he heard the whistle of an approaching train. He must hurry if he would reach Jackson City, return to the railway station, and leave Washington by daylight.

"Cab, suh, cab?"

It was one of the worst specimens of its kind, but the old man did not look at it. His eyes were fixed on the lamp-post marking the street at his right and his hands were stretched out before him as by one who walks in the dark.

"Cab, suh?"

The driver waited a moment, then drove off, the sound of the retreating wheels gradually dying away in the distance as Colonel St. John turned his back on the Potomac and hastened towards the Octagon House. He walked as one without volition of his own, with white, set face and automatic movement.

Along the quiet street he hurried, encountering no one, turned down the alley, and reached the broken wall, where he paused. Here he had stood that other night when the figure passed him; here was the very brick he had used, lying apart from its fellows as though ostracized for its cowardly deed.

Colonel St. John stooped and picked it up, but dropped it immediately as though it burned his hand. A man might meet death through his indirect instrumentality; such an occurrence was not unknown in his career. It was, however, a different matter to be asso-

ciated with the sordid details of the episode, and he recoiled from personal contact with the instrument employed.

The house was dark and forbidding in comparison with the surrounding whiteness of the snow-covered garden and moonlight-flooded sky. It stood grim and silent, an irresistible magnet drawing him steadily, unwillingly onward. Now his hand was on the latch of the back door; now he was in the hall; up—he must go up —to find—what?

He groped his way towards the stairs, but half way across the hall turned with a sudden revulsion of feeling. He was a fool—a fool. He must hurry, for the night was passing and Jackson City still unachieved.

Colonel St. John, shaking with the penetrating cold of the old house and with that inner chill, put his hands over his ears to shut out he knew not what, and made an unsteady dash in the darkness for the front door. Almost on the threshold he tripped and fell headlong, and his face was buried in the mattress the Redmond servants had thrust inside the door a few hours previous, when Leigh was removed.

Quivering in every nerve, the old man lay motionless, his heart thumping painfully and his body shrinking from the unknown which threatened from the surrounding darkness.

Gradually, however, he grew calmer and passed his hands wonderingly over the mattress, with a dim sense of recognition; a rip in one side greeted him familiarly. Colonel St. John sat upright and felt for his matches, struck one, and gazed at the prosaic ticking by its uncertain light. With a smothered exclamation he made his way across the hall and mounted the stairs with the

agility of a younger man, holding tightly to the banister, as though the contact of the unyielding wood imparted courage.

On the landing he paused. The caretaker's door stood wide open and that other door was open also. He could see the kerosene-stove now, burned low, and burdening the air with its aroma, for life in such stoves dies hard. There was his table with its unfinished sketch; he advanced reluctantly, again obeying the mysterious force he had no power to withstand, and stood before the inner door. Here was the chair with the pitcher of water and the few remedies he had ventured to apply; evidently it had been pushed aside carelessly, for the bottles had fallen over and the water was spilled upon the floor; here was the corner where the mattress had rested—empty now and uncommunicative indeed; and here on the floor at his feet lay a man's glove.

"Dead," he said slowly, "and removed by the authorities. Dead!"

He picked up the glove and examined it in the failing light. It was fresh and of good quality, such a glove as a gentleman would wear. At last he turned it inside out and bent to decipher the maker's name. Colonel St. John was obliged to resort to his glasses, for the marking was indistinct, but very slowly he spelled it out, letter by letter. It bore the stamp of a well-known English house.

The old man's knees gave way and he sank upon the floor beside the chair.

"Lyndhurst!" he gasped, "Lyndhurst!"

The stove spluttered and went out. Through a chink high up on the broken shutter the moon sent a pale ray which reached the wall opposite, softening its dingy cov-

ering into pearly whiteness, and making a narrow path of light across the dusty floor. It fell upon the broken chair and touched gently the gray head resting there among the bottles. The hand grasping the glove was in the shadow and the face turned towards the light was lined and haggard, but the eyes were closed and the exhausted faculties mercifully at rest, for Colonel St. John had fainted.

XXIX

It was well known in the political world that the Hon. Charles Rivers and the Hon. Joshua Grimes were apt to clash when brought into contact upon any subject whatever, be it trivial or important. Indeed, it was said that did the Member from Virginia arise to make a statement upon the floor of the House, the Member from South Dakota immediately rose also and flatly contradicted it, whether he was conversant with the subject or not, thus adding a piquancy to the sessions of that august body of lawmakers much enjoyed by its members.

Mr. Rivers clothed himself in superiority and sarcasm, in both of which weapons he was an adept; Mr. Grimes launched forth in invective and ridicule, and was frequently rewarded by laughter and applause from the public gallery, upon which despised spot his adversary turned an immaculate and contemptuous back.

The engagement of Mr. Rivers to Isabel Byrd had been what Mr. Grimes described as "a bitter pill to swallow," as he felt for that young woman a paternal affection and more than usual interest. Having no children of his own, he was apt to look with covetous eyes upon the more fortunate, and one of his frequent diversions was to cast his appraising eye about the youth of his acquaintance and select from among them such girls and young men as he thought would make up a creditable family.

Needless to say, this imaginary family was subject to constant change, and its members were frequently deposed by some unwitting speech or act.

"No child of mine could do that," he would reflect angrily, and forthwith disown him or her forever.

Isabel, however, had steadily held her position as favorite daughter for many years; he had watched her grow up and develop, exulting in her undeniable charm and acknowledged success even as her own father had gloried in it, and had lately begun to cast around for a suitable match. His son-in-law, he decided, should be young, handsome, high-principled, and filled with the enthusiasm of youth; money was of no consequence, as Isabel had plenty of her own, and he intended she should have more when he was done with it. So he watched and waited, and finally selected David Leigh as more nearly meeting the requirements than any young fellow of his acquaintance.

"Though even he," soliloquized Mr. Grimes regretfully, "doesn't quite fill the bill."

Forthwith he cultivated David assiduously, much to the surprise of that unsuspecting youth.

"He must be tempted," said Mr. Grimes, and brought such temptation in his way as he thought proper. David, his heart heavy with his own affairs, found no difficulty in passing through the ordeal unscathed, and was accordingly awarded the prize.

Therefore, when Mr. Grimes received a pretty little note from Isabel announcing her engagement and saying she "was sure he would be glad to hear it," he cast it indignantly from him and burst forth into language unprintable.

"I could have stood anybody else," he said sadly, the

first ebullition of wrath subsided, "anybody but that sleek, supercilious puppy."

To-day, however, Mr. Grimes had invited the supercilious puppy to lunch with him at the Metropolitan Club. This was in tacit acknowledgment of his own surrender to the inevitable and his determination to keep on good terms with Isabel's husband as long as possible, and Mr. Rivers had accepted the invitation for reasons of his own. Therefore the belligerents sat themselves peacefully down before a small, damask-covered table and did justice to a thoughtfully selected luncheon, carefully avoiding subjects which might involve rocks ahead.

"Try a Havana," said Mr. Grimes hospitably as the coffee arrived.

"They are unusually fine," remarked Mr. Rivers with an appreciative puff.

Then ensued a pause while the ashes accumulated on the ends of the Havanas.

"I'm glad it's the short session," said Mr. Grimes by way of introducing a subject for conversation, "and so nearly over. One gets tired of the routine business, you know."

"It is probable," returned Rivers coolly, "that the President may call an extra session. He certainly will if the Roostchook matter is not settled soon. There may be an investigating committee appointed to look into the methods of the State Department. In my opinion it is time something was done."

"Nonsense!" retorted Grimes, forgetting his rôle of placidity and yielding to long-established habit, "nothing of the kind."

Rivers smiled and shook the ashes off the end of his

cigar with a slow deliberation most exasperating to his companion.

"Oh, of course," he said, "if you think it unnecessary——"

He paused expressively, and Mr. Grimes, as he told Senator Byrd later, grew hot around the collar.

"Unnecessary," he exploded, "by Jove, sir, it would be an outrage!—I tell you, an outrage! Look at the man at the head of the Department of State and then talk about investigating committees."

"Yes," agreed Rivers amicably, "look at him. He's getting old. Every man has his day. I don't intend to imply anything derogatory to Mr. Redmond, for I have the highest regard for him as a man. As a statesman, I think he's worn out, if you want to know my opinion, and possibly a tool in the hands of the unscrupulous."

"Worn out," spluttered Mr. Grimes indignantly, "worn out, indeed! You don't know what you're talking about. Why, John Redmond can be our next President if he wants to—which, being a man of great good sense, he probably *doesn't*. Worn out, indeed! Who brought the country through the crisis in Ecuador without a drop of blood being spilt on either side? Who handled the Algerian question? Who——"

"Who muddled the Roostchook matter?" finished Rivers imperturbably. "Quite so. And let me tell you, my friend, it has gone a long way beyond a joke in the opinion of the President. I speak in confidence, of course, but it is really an open secret. Soon, I think, there will be at least one change in the Cabinet. A word to the wise is sufficient."

"I'm a plain man," said the other slowly, "and I

like plain speaking. I'm no good at riddles. If you have anything to say, speak out; don't insinuate everything and say nothing. It's a nasty habit, and one that I'd advise you to break yourself of. What do you mean?"

Rivers looked into the rapidly purpling face of his companion and laughed easily, then leaned forward, tapping the table with his fingers authoritatively.

"Where is the Secretary's secretary?" he said.

"Where is he?" returned Grimes, decidedly puzzled, "why, at his work, of course. Where else should he be?"

"He is not," returned Rivers decidedly, "nor has he been for the past week. The Department knows nothing of his movements; the place where he lives knows nothing; the Secretary professes to know nothing."

"Young man," interrupted the Member from South Dakota, "be careful how you express yourself. You are speaking of my friend."

"Well," said Rivers smoothly, "I'm only telling you what I thought would interest you. The general public will soon get on to the facts, I think. Mr. Leigh has gone; the Roostchook papers have vanished; the synopsis of the President's policy cannot be found. Moreover, I have proof."

"Well, you'll need it," retorted Mr. Grimes grimly, "out with it."

Then Rivers related his story of the Octagon House; how he happened in there accidentally and found upon the floor a bit of paper with the red, white, and blue cord, the few written words, and the incriminating initials in the corner. The pocket of Mr. Grimes grew

suddenly heavy with the weight of a scrap of paper picked up at Mrs. Redmond's ball and tied with twisted, tri-colored cord.

"I searched the house, of course," he remarked glibly; "it's an eerie old place, by the way. It was quite empty, though bearing traces of recent occupation; a half-finished drawing in an upper room indicated an intended return. I shall, of course, place my information in the hands of the President; it is the only course open to me, and I fancy it may precipitate matters a bit. However, the end was bound to come."

"And who," inquired the Member from South Dakota, studiously polite, "will be Secretary of State?"

"That," returned the Member from Virginia, "remains for the President to decide. He will naturally select one in sympathy with the Administration."

"Ah," remarked Mr. Grimes.

There was silence for a moment, then Rivers rose and remarked he must keep an appointment.

"It's been an uncommonly interesting hour," he said cordially, "and I believe we are beginning to understand each other at last. We both have the good of the country at heart, Mr. Grimes, and I'm glad we have arrived at a better appreciation of each other after our many differences. They didn't amount to much though, after all, did they? And I fancy Miss Byrd won't tolerate them in the future; you stand very high in her calendar of friends, you know, and, consequently, I want very much to add you to mine."

The Member from Virginia had a decided charm of manner when he chose to exert it, and did not think it necessary to refer to the existing estrangement, which he believed merely temporary. So he extended his hand

as he rose to depart with the smile reserved for special occasions. And Mr. Grimes rose also—small, stout, red-faced, and scowling. His hands were thrust deep down in his pockets and his short legs planted far apart.

"The understanding's all right," he said decidedly, "perhaps even more so than you realize. I don't know why you have seen fit to honor me with these extraordinary revelations—our relations are not exactly confidential, you know. I see your drift, of course, and I see the trend of affairs—worse luck. But as to the story you told me about Leigh and your disinterested devotion to the country, why, it's due to you as well as myself to tell you plainly that I don't believe a word of it. And so, sir, if you have finished your lunch, I will say good-afternoon."

With which concluding remark Mr. Grimes strode away with as much dignity as his adipose tissue permitted, leaving the Member from Virginia to digest his words with his lunch, and get what nourishment he could from both.

Seething with righteous indignation, Mr. Grimes proceeded to the Department of State and inquired for Mr. Leigh. Mr. Leigh was absent, the messenger replied, and the date of his return was uncertain. Then, could he not see the Secretary himself? The messenger regretted that the Secretary was indisposed and not at the Department to-day. Mr. Leigh's house address; perhaps they would oblige him with it, as his business was important.

The messenger would inquire of the Chief Clerk; probably he knew it. He came back presently with a number written on a slip of paper and the gratuitous information that Mr. Leigh was out of the city, and

therefore any visit to his lodgings would be without result.

Nevertheless, Mr. Grimes repaired without delay to Mrs. Colson's domicile and inquired for the lady of the house, who was much excited by the receipt of the card of a Member of Congress, and had visions of renting an entire suite at an exorbitant price as she ran her side-combs through her hair and wished she had put on her black silk.

"Madam," said Mr. Grimes abruptly, "I understand Mr. Leigh has a room here."

Mrs. Colson collapsed into a chair, her dreams of expensive suites rapidly evaporating.

"Mr. Leigh *did* have a room here," she faltered, "but now——"

"Well," said Mr. Grimes irritably, "well, Madam, has he moved?"

Mrs. Colson clasped her hands and raised her eyes to the ceiling after the manner of a picture in her bedroom she much admired entitled, "Simply to Thy Cross I Cling."

"Ah," she said, sighing heavily, "Mr. Leigh has moved indeed, and to a higher sphere."

Mr. Grimes sat upright in startled silence as she applied the edge of a stiffly starched handkerchief to her nose and chafed it delicately.

"When is the funeral?" inquired the Member of Congress in a hushed whisper.

"Sir," said Mrs. Colson with dignity, "there has been no funeral, nor will there be. I spoke to you from the dictates of my own heart and not from the mundane evidence of facts. I believe that the unhappy young man——"

"Madam," interrupted the Member of Congress, "it is facts I am after. It is of no consequence which way your heart dictates. Does Mr. Leigh retain his room with you? That is what I want to know."

Mrs. Colson hesitated, coughed in an embarrassed manner, and finally faltered that while he had not given it up, yet he had been absent a week now without luggage of any sort, and no one knew anything about him. It was natural to suppose him dead. She was a poor widow, and—— In short, it was the first of the month and Mr. Leigh's board was overdue; she felt it her duty, much as she liked the unhappy young man, to reimburse herself by disposing of his effects very shortly and finding another tenant for the room.

"Painful as such a course would be to one of my natural refinement," she continued with a deep sigh, "I feel I can no longer hesitate. The widow, sir, who struggles for her daily bread cannot follow the course her gentle birth would counsel, she must provide for the future."

"Just so," said Mr. Grimes concisely, taking out his purse; "now, how much did he owe for this precious room?"

Mrs. Colson unhesitatingly named a price ten dollars in excess of the actual amount and watched the Congressman count out the bills one by one, while she wiped her eyes with the immaculate handkerchief.

"Now," said that gentleman, handing over the money, "I engage that room, furnished just as it is, with nothing touched or moved, to use when I feel inclined and to let stand empty if I choose. And I desire to take immediate possession. Will you kindly show the way?"

Mrs. Colson said afterwards, when relating the incident to Miss Jackson, that she supposed she ought to have waited until she looked him up in the Congressional Directory, but really he was such a domineering old man and had such a decided way about him that before she knew it she had escorted him up into the north room and left him there alone.

"And you know," she added plaintively, "we might have all been murdered in our beds."

And Miss Jackson had replied reflectively that she would very much like to have a look at him. Perhaps he was a millionaire uncle of Mr. Leigh's, or perhaps a bank burglar hiding from justice. Anything was possible in these days.

Alone in David's little room the Member of Congress began a systematic search for any paper or letter which might throw light upon his mysterious disappearance.

"I don't like to pry into his private affairs," he muttered as he sat down before the desk, "but somebody's got to look after him."

The Member of Congress hesitated to turn the key which stood ready in the lock, and fell into a brown study in the uncomfortable little chair, several sizes too small for him. At last he roused himself abruptly.

"Rivers, Secretary of State," he said, as he opened the desk; "not if Joshua Grimes is as smart as he used to be. Now, my boy, we'll see."

But he found nothing he could regard as a clue to Leigh's disappearance, and finally took up a newspaper which lay on the floor, apparently undisturbed since it had been flung aside. It bore the date of December 26th, and one spot was creased and rumpled as though crushed by an impatient hand. Carefully adjusting his

glasses, Mr. Grimes read the items of the society column so unkindly treated and found there the bald statement that Senator Byrd announced the engagement of his daughter Isabel to the Hon. Charles Rivers, Member of Congress from Virginia.

Mr. Grimes smoothed out and carefully folded the paper, then returned to the desk before him. Opening a little drawer he had overlooked in his previous research, he discovered a package of notes, addressed in a hand with which he himself was quite familiar as well as with the coat-of-arms upon the seal; beside the notes was a faded rose and beneath them both a white glove, carefully folded and laid away.

The Member from South Dakota shut the little drawer with remorseful haste; he felt he had in some way desecrated a shrine.

"The poor lad!" he ejaculated, softly, "the poor lad!"

XXX

WITH the dawn of morning came returning consciousness to Colonel St. John.

He raised his head and looked with dazed, bewildered eyes at the chair with its few dingy bottles, at the stove, now cold and odorless, and at the glove still clinched in his hand. His first sensation was one of physical discomfort as he stretched out his fingers, moving them with difficulty, for they were numb with the cold. There was a strange, light feeling in his head, while a heavy weight seemed to have settled upon his chest. Had he been ill?

The glove fell from his nerveless hand, and he picked it up stiffly, looking absently about for its mate. The sight of it was distasteful to him. He wondered why; it was a very ordinary glove.

He felt dimly that something was lacking from the bare little room; something had vanished which should have been present, and shrank from the emptiness, oppressed by the heaviness of space. Why was he on the floor?

Colonel St. John struggled to rise and essayed to walk, but his feet seemed reluctant to perform their duty and he tottered uncertainly, catching at the wall to preserve his balance. He must hurry, that thought was paramount, for he was going somewhere and it was time he was off.

Resting his forehead against the window-pane, thick with the dust of many seasons, he looked through the broken shutter out into the dull gray of the winter's morning. Far in the distance across the Mall he saw the black smoke curling upward from an engine crossing the Potomac. Why, certainly, he knew now. He was going away somewhere. He must hurry or he would be too late. His hat and coat—where were they? He must hasten.

Stumbling blindly forward, he made his way into the hall and down the stairs, clutching at the banisters for support and making all possible speed.

"I'll be late," he said, "late. The train won't wait."

Suddenly he paused, with shaking knees and ashen face. Directly in his path lay the mattress. He recognized the rip in the side, and with recognition came a flood of memory, unwelcome, obtrusive, and overwhelming. The old man stood as one petrified. At last he raised his hand and pointed a trembling finger at the mattress at his feet.

"It's empty," he cried shrilly, "empty."

And the house reverberated with the sound of his voice.

"Empty," returned the rooms and passages of the lower floor.

"Empty," echoed down the stairway from the vacant space above.

Colonel St. John uttered an inarticulate sound and fled up the stairs, away from the mattress with its unpleasant suggestiveness. At the entrance to his room he stepped upon something soft and recoiled violently. It was only the glove he had dropped as he started to

leave the house—Lyndhurst's glove. He remembered it now.

"Broad day," he said as the sun cast a sickly ray through the broken shutter, "broad day, and no doubt a watch set upon the house."

The old man sank into the chair beside the table and rested his head upon the unfinished drawing. Now and then he shivered and glanced towards the daylight and freedom outside the dusty glass.

For a long time he sat motionless, oblivious to the gradually increasing cold. He entertained no doubt that Leigh was dead—and the punishment for murder was hanging. Colonel St. John felt in his pocket and produced a small vial, removed the cork, and sniffed at the contents. It was nearly full. Had he the strength to put it to his lips? Very slowly he replaced the cork and returned the vial to his pocket. It is when life is most filled with darkness and terror that mankind appears to cling to it most tenaciously, perhaps through some idea of future reparation, perhaps through dread of the unknown.

The day wore on. Colonel St. John felt the chill and cold of the place reaching his heart and looked longingly at the kerosene-stove and the full oil-can in the corner. Dared he light it?

"It smells," he said, seeking some other means of warmth; "the damn thing smells."

Wrapping himself in a blanket from the cot, he waited for the day to pass. His watch had stopped and he had no means of marking the time, but each minute seemed a lifetime and the hours spread themselves into eternity. Was this a day?

It chanced that no curious visitors investigated the

old house, and he thought resentfully that it must therefore surely be under police surveillance.

Sooner or later he must be discovered, or die from cold and starvation. Colonel St. John again felt in his pocket and his fingers touched the small vial, lingering thoughtfully a moment, and were then rapidly withdrawn.

It is given to some men to drink of the cup of dissipation while it bubbles with pleasure, sparkles with brilliancy, and intoxicates with the exhilaration of success, then to pause and watch the bubbles fade, the sparkle disappear, and the exhilaration pass away, leaving in its place flatness and a distaste for further draughts of like character. Others, however, drink thirstily, draining it to the last drop and finding in its bitter dregs the fire of sorrow and the ashes of humiliation.

Colonel St. John, dumbly expecting he knew not what, realized he had reached the bottom of the cup and cursed the day he raised it to his lips.

He did more. He cursed the life he had lived and the life to come; the father who begot him and the mother who gave him birth. He cursed the day he came to America, the night Count Valdmir sought him at Jackson City, and the work he had done for the Russian since that date. It was he who held him—Albert St. John—in a grip of iron, and who had indirectly brought about the impending crisis. The old man looked at his shaking hand and wished it might have withered before it drew the plans his master demanded.

Suddenly he paused, and his lip lifted in an unpleasant smile. Opening a drawer in the table he produced them, one after another. To-day he was to have deliv-

ered them. Rapidly he looked them over; they were complete in every detail except the one upon the table yet unfinished, and which he added to the collection, tearing it from beneath the thumb tacks viciously, as though anxious to deface it as much as possible.

Colonel St. John, the bundle under his arm, again sought the lower floor, going down deeper still, into the basement, with its brick vaults, and into the old kitchen, with the great stone fireplace occupying one end and looking capable of generous hospitality had it been so disposed.

In the fireplace he deposited his burden, checking the papers off one by one with satisfaction. They comprised the defences of the principal seaports of the country and were traced with no small skill and accuracy. There were also papers of explanation accompanying them and other data of importance to the Government.

He produced a match and struck it on the hearthstone; it flickered and would not burn; but he struck another, shielding it with his hand and nursing the flame carefully, for it was his last. The match flamed up quickly and went out, leaving the cellar dark and clammy with the penetrating damp.

Back again, up the stairs to his room. He would get another match. So full of one idea was the old man that he almost forgot the reason for the act or the motive actuating the desire for revenge upon Count Valdmir, but the sight of the mattress in the lower hall again brought with it the flood of memory.

It was murder for which he was being hunted, and the punishment was hanging.

Colonel St. John forgot the papers in the fireplace;

forgot Count Valdmir and the desire for revenge, remembering only David Leigh and Lyndhurst. Lyndhurst, who had that other life also checked against him, and who had left his glove in token that he would return.

Faint and sick from cold and lack of food, Colonel St. John cowered beneath the blanket and watched the fading of the light through the broken shutter. Now and then a board creaked loudly and he shrank further into the corner, expecting the opening of the door; now and then a rat ran across the attic overhead, squealing in angry dispute with its fellows; and now and then came other sounds—faint rustlings and indistinct murmurs like the sighing of the wind.

"A rat in a trap," he said, "taken like vermin to be exterminated."

He felt for the little vial and drew it out.

The light grew dimmer and failed entirely. Another day gone; another night arrived.

"Die like a man," counselled an inner voice, "not like a felon. It's got to come. Die like a man."

"It's got to come," he repeated.

The end of all things, the leap in the dark; the putting away of mortality and assuming immortality. Yes, it had to come. It had come through him to David Leigh and to Hertford.

It had also come, strangely, mysteriously, with incredible swiftness to another—a woman. There had been a vacancy in the harem of the Khedive and no questions asked. A favorite had vanished—such things had happened before; Colonel St. John had vanished also, taking with him the opals. The game had been dangerous and the price high.

Well, since it came some time or other to everyone, why should a little sooner or later matter? And Hertford did it himself with a pistol. Colonel St. John wished he had a pistol. It was so soon over.

"Like a man," he said, raising the vial. "I was a man once."

The little bottle fell to the floor with a splintering of glass as Colonel St. John drew the blanket closer and prepared to wait.

There were noises again, but they did not trouble him; the boards creaked and the rats squealed unobserved, for out of the darkness shadowy figures approached and bent over him, the room was alive with voices long silent, and Colonel St. John listened to them dreamily. They were very welcome, and he tried to tell them so, but they did not seem to hear him. His head swam and his limbs felt numb.

"I believe," he said politely, "it's very rude, I know, but I believe I will take a nap."

The night crept on. Again the moon rose and flooded the city with its white light. In the midst of the old garden a figure stood irresolute—a woman, who held her cloak tightly, clutching it convulsively, as though she found comfort in its warmth and wished to wrap it even closer around her slender form. Now and then she advanced a few steps with many an apprehensive glance towards the upper windows of the grim old house. At last the garden was crossed and she put a trembling hand upon the rusty latch.

At the same instant the front door opened and shut with a quick decision very different from the hesitating creaking of the hinges of its companion in the rear.

The odor of cigar-smoke filled the hall and a man's

voice muttered something as he paused to strike a match. The woman leaned against the wall, her hands extended in the darkness.

"I'm too late," she said, "too late."

Suddenly she gathered her skirts together, set her teeth firmly, and began the ascent of the old back stairs, feeling her way timidly, but moving swiftly with the decision of definite purpose.

It was a race now between the man and woman, for he also walked with the directness of one familiar with the objective point, up the front stairs, past the window on the landing looking out over the moonlit garden, past the second floor, with its open doors leading into vacant rooms eloquent in their silence, and up again to the third floor. Upon the landing he paused, for his quick ears caught a sound unexpected and apparently disconcerting, and the hand extended towards the caretaker's door hesitated as he drew farther into the shadow.

She had reached the top now, and stepped out into the upper hall with a gasp of mingled fear and relief. The darkness of the back stairs had been black indeed, and light of any kind was preferable. The hood of her cloak had fallen back and a ray of moonlight shone upon her upturned face, steadfast in its purpose and pitiful in its unconscious appeal. It touched the flashing jewel in her hair, her brow, her cheeks, her quivering lips, but left in the shadow of the black lashes blue eyes dark with pain and misty with unshed tears.

"Estelle," he cried, "*you?* Here alone. What does this mean?"

"Ah," she said, "it was you. I did not know. I heard—someone."

"What are you doing here?" he repeated.

"I came," she replied, indicating the inner room by a motion of her hand, "to bring him money, to help him get away. I waited until night because the darkness was safer for him."

"You are in evening dress?"

"I came from the British Embassy," she said simply, "I went there to-night alone; it was easy to get away, and required no explanations. But you—why are you here?"

His face darkened ominously.

"I came," he said grimly, "to threaten. He has tricked me with a bundle of useless papers, and has in his possession others of value to me. I came to claim my property."

The caretaker's door swung slowly open, propelled by an invisible force. Back it went, back against the wall, exposing the bare little room with the figure of the old man wrapped in his quilt upon the floor.

With an irrepressible shudder Estelle clutched the Russian's arm.

"Who opened it?" she whispered, "who—opened it?"

Colonel St. John stirred uneasily. He felt he must, for some reason, make an effort, so he opened his eyes unwillingly and did not at once close them. The room was lighted by a candle, and he even thought he detected the odor of a kerosene-stove, but he was in Berlin at his salon, so that was impossible. Count Valdmir had produced the candle and endeavored to induce the stove to burn, but such details mattered not to Colonel St. John. He must greet the lady in the shining satin gown.

"How do you do, Madame," he remarked feebly, "I am delighted you were able to be with us."

"Father," she cried, "don't you know me? It's Estelle."

"Estelle?" he repeated vaguely, "yes, Estelle."

Then he suddenly sat upright and clutched her hand.

"I must get away," he said rapidly, "clear away. Estelle, my dear, it's murder. For God's sake help me. Give me money. It's murder, I tell you—murder, and a St. John was never hung."

"No, father, no," she said soothingly, "he is alive. Mr. Leigh is not dead, but he's very ill. I've come to bring you money and to help you."

His features contracted and he fell back helpless.

"The pain," he gasped, "the pain. I'm dying, Estelle, dying."

"Quick," she said imperatively over her shoulder, "a doctor; I must have a doctor."

But Count Valdmir shook his head. He held in his hand the fragments of the broken vial, upon one of which the label was distinct.

"Too late," he said quietly, "the poison has done its work and all the doctors in the universe could not help him now. In a few minutes the paroxysm will be over and he will not suffer. By and by they will be more frequent, his mind will wander, and then will come the end."

"And I came to warn him," she said bitterly, "to help him—too late; like all my good deeds—too late. Bring a doctor, I demand it. He may be able to give some relief."

But the Russian did not move.

"I know the poison well," he returned coolly; "I have seen men die of it before. I will not leave you to fetch a doctor here; I will not have you associated with

this scandal. See, he is better. He wants to speak with you."

She knelt upon the floor and pressed the gray head to her breast; quite suddenly she remembered some childish ailment when he had carried her, restless and feverish, from room to room, soothing and cheering her with the patience of a woman.

"Father," she said, "father."

"I drank it," he said eagerly, "I wanted to die like a man, Estelle—like a man."

"Yes," she replied brokenly, "yes."

"You'll be safe from me in future," he continued, "quite safe, Estelle. I have not been a good father. But I was proud of you, my dear."

He paused and his eye fell upon the Russian, who advanced slowly.

"Is that Count Valdmir?" he demanded. "Have nothing to do with him, Estelle. He's a dangerous man—hard and cruel. He's brought me to this; he'll bring you to worse. In Russia there are women——"

Again his features contracted and he sank back with a groan. Count Valdmir bent over him and put his finger on his wrist.

"The pulse is weak," he remarked, "his eyes are dim. He will not suffer much more."

"Estelle," whispered the old man faintly, "he must not have them, the papers; I put them—are you there, Estelle?—the plans of fortifications, you know. He shall not have them, I put them——"

"Yes," she said anxiously, "yes, father, where?"

"The old fireplace," he gasped, "in the basement. The match went out—ah, the pain!"

"It is over," she said sadly.

But the heavy lids lifted again and the eyes stared fixedly at the flaming opal at her throat.

"The price of blood," he cried, raising a shaking hand, "the price of blood. Take them off!—take them off!"

Instinctively her hand covered the jewel and she shrank back alarmed. As she did so Colonel St. John sat upright and assumed the attitude of one who addresses a large assembly.

"Awful fool," he said with his best society manner; "had a life and made a mess of it. Damn fool—won't do it again."

He paused and smiled in a conciliatory manner.

"I apologize," he said. "Done a lot of mischief. Made a lot of trouble. Quiet now—I apologize."

The Russian darted forward and caught the swaying body.

"It is the end," he said gently.

XXXI

THE passing of a soul is fraught with mystery. Before it the callous stand silent and abashed, the reckless pause with involuntary awe, the timid shrink with sinking hearts, and all unite in a moment of breathless apprehension, wondering when they in turn shall pass into the darkness of the great Beyond.

And what has gone? The form of man remains; motionless certainly, but then are not the sleeping quiet? Therefore, why approach reluctantly? It is the same for whom, a brief moment ago, we felt affection or dislike, admiration or pity, respect or contempt. The same, yet not the same. King Death reigns supreme in his impenetrable silence, and the children of men abase themselves before him.

So Count Valdmir bared his head respectfully before Colonel St. John, as though acknowledging the presence of his superior.

Overhead in the attic the rats held high carnival; outside the wind swept across the snow-covered garden and around the corners of the house, shaking the window-frames and causing strange, whispering noises to echo down the chimneys and through the vacant halls; and in the bare little upper room the man and woman stood speechless before IT.

"Come," he said gently at last, "we must go."

But Mrs. Redmond did not answer. She was on her

knees, chafing the hands which grew cold beneath her touch.

"Come," he repeated, "you can do no good."

She rose reluctantly, while he bent over the inanimate form and removed the contents of the pockets. They held only a few unimportant letters and a shabby leather case, which he opened.

"This," he said gently, "belongs to you."

Estelle glanced at the woman's face, with its wistful sadness, and at the laughing baby beside it.

"Oh," she exclaimed passionately, "he loved us! He *must* have loved us!"

The hot tears welled into her eyes as she stooped and pressed her lips to the unresponsive ones upon the floor.

"I cannot leave him here alone," she said, "he was my father."

The Russian looked at his watch by the light of the candle.

"Time passes," he said, "it is later than I thought. We must not stay here. I will put money in his pocket to insure a decent burial."

"No, no," she interrupted, "that is for me to do. I brought him money."

"As you please," he responded briefly. "Come away."

But Colonel St. John's daughter lingered, bending to kiss the cold forehead and turning on the threshold for a last look at the still figure.

"I am his child," she said, "I did not love him—but I am his child."

She followed the Russian down the curved stairway, past the silent rooms, and into the lower hall.

"Where are you going?" she said sharply as he turned aside.

"I am going," he replied, "to investigate the fireplace in the kitchen. Will you come?"

The candle made but a feeble gleam of light in the dark cellar, where the dampness hung in drops upon walls and ceiling and the floor was slippery to walk upon.

Count Valdmir stooped over the fireplace and examined the contents.

"The fire is laid," he remarked shortly.

"Be quick," she said imperatively, "do whatever you will with them. I cannot stay here. The air smothers me."

The Russian put the candle upon the floor and turned to his companion. His face was white and set and the hand which placed the candle shook until the grease ran down upon it.

"It is for you to say what I shall do with them," he said, "for you to say."

"For me?" she repeated, "for me?"

"I have waited," he said quietly, "for a message from—the Countess Valdmir. She was to notify me when to expect her. I wonder," he advanced a step nearer, "I wonder why she is so silent.

"The castles beyond the steppes," he continued, "are waiting for their mistress. There are empty rooms ready for the touch of a woman's hand, carved stairways wearying for the tread of a woman's foot, and marble corridors longing for the echo of a woman's voice. There is peace, Estelle, safety, happiness, and boundless love for you with me, and the castles themselves will prove palaces of enchantment for us both."

"Or prisons of Siberia," she interrupted.

"Love!" she continued contemptuously. "What do you know of love? Passion, perhaps, strange and inexplicable, but not, *not* love. Love is patient, long-suffering, and unselfish; tender, enduring, and wonderfully comforting. Oh, I know. My husband loves me, but you——

"Count Valdmir," she continued as he turned abruptly away, "I have something to say to you."

"I am listening."

Mrs. Redmond, however, seemed to find articulation difficult, for she made several ineffectual efforts to speak.

"Look at me," she said at last, "and tell me what you see."

"I see," he replied slowly, "God's most wonderful work,—the blessing or the curse of man,—a beautiful woman."

"Yes, a woman," she returned, "beautiful, you call her, and the work of God. You are wrong, Count. He is not responsible for this woman, although He created the child in the image which seemed best to Him. She is the result of man's handiwork—first a coward and then a thief."

"Estelle!"

"Is it not true? A coward before your threats and stooping even to obey your commands. Does not your course resemble blackmail, Count, and is it much more creditable than that of my father, from whom you so bravely defended me? He wished money for his daily needs; you desired the glory of a masterstroke in the world of diplomacy, and I was the most convenient tool for you both—I. Oh, let us go. I do not know why I came down here with you. I am afraid."

"You came," he interposed gently, "because you trusted me—because your heart instinctively responds to mine. Ah, it is so, Estelle. Do not shrink from me; do not be afraid. Through your life and mine runs an undercurrent drawing us irresistibly together. It is deep, unfathomable, and very strong. It leads——"

"Into darkness," she interrupted, "into a bottomless pit of misery."

"How pale you are, my love, and how your opals glow. Is it because the heart beneath them is so restless and ill at ease?"

"Restless indeed," she said, "and very ill at ease."

The candle flickered in the draught from the chimney and the papers in the fireplace rustled impatiently.

"It is time to end the farce," she resumed slowly. "Take the maps, Count Valdmir; I am powerless to prevent it. They are yours, and no doubt you paid well for them. But even then your chain is not complete. I went to my husband's office at your command and stole the Roostchook papers—the price you set upon my happiness. I even started to meet you here and give them into your hands, but I lost them, thank God! I lost them. No, do not speak; I have more to say.

"I took the synopsis, also, because I wished to preserve this happiness of mine at any cost, but by degrees I saw what I had done. I brought the cloud of dishonor to darken the life of the best man in the world, and when I realized what that meant to him I determined to remove it at any price. I even offered myself in exchange for your ill-gained knowledge. I played with you, Count Valdmir, to gain time, as you would have done with me had our positions been reversed, and you

did not get the synopsis. To-night before I came away I put it in my husband's desk where he cannot fail to find it, because I did not know what might happen to me, and because I have reached a conclusion as to what is best for me to do—best for him, I mean."

Count Valdmir made an effort to speak, but she raised her hand, commanding silence.

"And so," she continued, her voice trembling uncontrollably, " because I love the very ground my husband walks upon, but seem fated to bring only suffering upon him—*I*, who would gladly die for him if it were possible, because I am willing to sacrifice myself that *his* reputation may be untarnished, I am going away from him forever. But not with you, Count Valdmir. You will return alone to the castles beyond the steppes, the palaces of enchantment, the prisons of Siberia."

The wind swept around the corner of the house, down the chimney, through the old kitchen and into the cellar beyond, almost extinguishing the candle upon the hearth.

" I am cold," she said with a shiver as the papers rustled in the fireplace.

" Those papers, Estelle," he said, " are of inestimable value to my country. They contain data which for years it has endeavored to procure—plans, maps, and other information priceless not only in connection with the Roostchook matter. Securing them was the greatest triumph of my career, and I have accomplished some difficult tasks. There they lie, complete, within reach of my hand. I have greatly desired them."

He paused, the muscles in his throat quivering visibly, and again she shivered in her fur-lined cloak.

" I am cold," she repeated, " cold."

" Then, Madame," he returned, picking up the candle, " permit me to light the fire."

He bent over the hearth and held the flame to a loose corner of the under sheet of paper; it blazed up instantly.

"Ah!" she exclaimed.

They were all on fire now, and the cellar was alight with flickering flames casting bright shadows into the darkness—eager flames which blazed fiercely as though anxious to be done with their task.

" They burn well," he said, " do they not?"

She did not reply, and he folded his arms across his breast and continued quietly.

" They are copies, you know. The originals were returned to the files of the State Department, or the War Department, as the case might be. How they blaze! I can see your face distinctly. It is very white, and beneath your eyes are purple shadows. You have suffered, and it is my fault—mine and the man's upstairs."

" Let the dead rest," she interrupted sharply.

He came a step nearer.

" So you think I do not love you," he said, " that I do not know how to love."

The light in the hearth died a little, then rose with renewed vigor, and across the floor black beetles hurried frantically, the heat having disturbed their place of residence.

" Very soon," resumed the Russian, " there will be a charred mass in the fireplace, the result of weeks of labor. Soon, very soon, we will go. Recently my heart blazed as brightly as those papers; like them, it will shortly be dead and cold, the result of weeks—yes, years —of longing.

"I am not very familiar with Bible history," he continued, "but is there not a story of a man in hell, burning with thirst and seeing almost within his reach the water which would give him new life? He stretches out his hand, but he cannot touch it. His throat is parched and he trembles with eagerness. It is there—pure and life-giving, but not for him. He longs, but may not attain; struggles, but may not achieve; he sees, but may not touch. For him the thirst, burning, unquenchable, never to be allayed. Put your cloak about you, Estelle Redmond, I am going to take you home."

She gazed at him with wide, incredulous eyes.

"Back to the house you left with such unwilling feet; back to the life you relinquished with such bitter tears; —back to the Secretary of State."

"Home," she repeated, "home."

"Love is unselfish, patient, and long-suffering," he said; "you told me so yourself a moment ago, did you not?"

The blaze flickered and died away, leaving a charred mass with here and there a glowing spot of red.

"The fire is out," said Count Valdmir, "let us go."

In the garden, beneath the curious moon, he paused and consulted his watch.

"One o'clock," he said; "we spent two hours there. What arrangement did you make about your carriage?"

"It was not to return. I said I would come home with Miss Byrd."

She turned and looked long at the old house, with trembling lips.

"He's there alone," she whispered, "alone."

"It is best so," he said gently; "believe me, it is best."

"You have been generous," she said brokenly.

"Three men," he said, "met here in Washington. They, and they only, had you cause to fear. It was a strange coincidence. Lyndhurst you need no longer dread; he is a gentleman and he knows you only as Mrs. Redmond. Your father's lips and mine are sealed forever—his by death and mine by love. You hold the key to the situation, and you only. Let me entreat you not to turn it. Only be silent and all is well. Now let us go."

She laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"I want to thank you," she said. "I misjudged you. I—I don't know what to say, Count Valdmir. I am stunned by the events of to-night. Some other time——"

"The love of man for woman," said the Russian softly, "passes understanding. Oh Estelle, some time you will think of me with pity instead of bitterness. Look at me—into my eyes."

Instinctively she obeyed.

"Blue eyes," he whispered, "meant for happiness, but dark to-night with shadows. Red lips—ah, they should not quiver; they were made for smiles. Do not turn away, let me look. It is the last. Have I not renounced utterly—unconditionally?"

The wind swept down the alley, through the broken wall, and across the moonlit garden. It caught her cloak and blew it open, stirring the lace upon her gown and touching with icy finger the white breast against which a red rose lay faded and dying.

"Give me the rose," he said, and she held it towards him in silence.

"Sometime," he said quietly, "perhaps I shall dream

dreams in the castles beyond the steppes. Who knows? Let us go."

* * * * * * *

The moon shone into an empty garden and down the alley, forming a path of light across the dark bricks.

It looked again through the broken shutter of the Octagon House and into the upper room, and the light fell with subdued lustre. For here there was a stillness unlike the quiet of the garden; an emptiness, and yet a Presence—dominant, invisible, and awe-inspiring.

So the moon shone very softly, fearing to disturb the old man upon the floor.

XXXII

MISS JACKSON, on her return from the Treasury Department one afternoon, inserted her latchkey in Mrs. Colson's front-door with a gusty sigh. This sigh was as much a matter of habit as the turning of the key, and was intended to signify a protest against the act of living. When she closed the door, leaving herself inside, she repeated it, as a matter of course.

A number of letters and papers lay on the little hall table, and she turned them over curiously, examining the address of each with care. Miss Jackson did not conduct a voluminous correspondence, but she took an interest in her friends', and therefore never failed to scrutinize the contents of the hall table.

A square blue envelope lay at the top of the pile, sealed with gold wax and freighted with perfume. It suggested the romantic side of life, even as a tradesman's envelope beside it proclaimed the prosaic. Miss Jackson read the superscription, raised it inquiringly to her nose, and again perused the address, as though doubting the evidence of her eyes.

"Well, I never!" she said aloud; "the idea!"

A door at her right opened a few inches and a beckoning hand appeared in the aperture.

"Come in," said Mrs. Colson in a stage whisper, and Miss Jackson accepted the invitation.

"Did you see it?" continued Mrs. Colson eagerly.

She was engaged in making out her monthly bills, but she pushed them aside and hospitably offered her guest a seat on the corner of the box couch.

"He's been here now two years," she continued, "and it's the first thing in a woman's writing that has ever come for him. It *is* a woman, don't you think so?"

"A girl," rejoined Miss Jackson with some asperity, "and a foolish one at that. Very black ink, broad stub pen, straggling writing sprawling all over the envelope, and perfumed to death. Oh, yes, it's some silly girl."

Miss Jackson herself used pale ink, a finely pointed pen, and produced the most delicately minute specimens of shaded Spencerian handwriting.

"Dear me," said Mrs. Colson, "I fear you're right, Miss Jackson. *Do* you suppose he is going to be married? He has been here so long and is so regular in his payments, I should dislike to see him a victim to some flighty young thing who doesn't know enough to make him comfortable."

"Well," said Miss Jackson thoughtfully, "I don't know, Mrs. Colson, but it's very easy to tell. Now, if he picks up that letter carelessly and puts it in his pocket without looking at it, that's a sure sign he was expecting it. But if he seems surprised when he sees it and looks at the postmark—— By the way, what was it? I entirely forgot to look. I'm not often so careless."

"Washington," returned Mrs. Colson definitely, "posted at eight-fifty this morning. I looked. Now, Miss Jackson, if we set the door ajar we get a good view of the table. I think we are justified, under the circumstances, don't you?"

"Oh, by all means," agreed Miss Jackson, her hand on the knob. "How is that?"

"About an inch wider—there. Now, you sit in the rocker, here is the evening paper. I'll be busy writing."

Several times the front-door opened and closed and the pile of letters dwindled perceptibly.

"Ahem," said Miss Jackson, lowering the paper a few inches.

Mr. Marks carefully put his umbrella in the rack and hung up his hat.

"Always so methodical," murmured Mrs. Colson appreciatively.

He then approached the table, glanced without interest at the few remaining letters, appropriated a copy of the *Scientific American*, and prepared to go upstairs. As he turned away, however, the blue envelope with its decided black characters caught his eye. Mr. Marks hesitated, picked it up gingerly, studied the address incredulously, held it doubtfully before his nose, and finally marched resolutely upstairs, the letter held lightly between his thumb and finger as though it contained a dynamite bomb which might explode at any moment.

"He's not engaged," ejaculated Mrs. Colson with a sigh of relief, "but there is no telling how soon he will be."

"Well," said Miss Jackson acidly, "it's very evident *she* is taking the initiative. I have my opinion of the girl of the period—she is unwomanly, that's the best I can say for her. Can't you get a little more heat into my room, Mrs. Colson? I could see my breath when I dressed this morning."

"I'll do my best, Miss Jackson," returned Mrs. Col-

son in tones of suffering forbearance, " but the furnace is old and the landlord won't replace it. I'm sure I burn coal enough, as my bills would testify. It is a hard life, trying to satisfy everybody and not pleasing anybody. My father owned a hundred slaves and I——"

But Miss Jackson departed for her frosty apartment without waiting to hear more. She was familiar with the story of Mrs. Colson's inability to adjust her shoestrings before the war and knew the formula by heart. Moreover, like many examples of humanity, she was verbose in the recital of her own woes and intolerant of the trials of others.

Meanwhile, in the seclusion of his own apartment Mr. Marks had opened his letter. He did this carefully, inserting a penknife under the flap and running it neatly across the top with a clean, clear cut, in the most approved manner. If the knife shook a little, no one but himself was any the wiser; nor was it a matter of comment to the world at large that he again held the envelope beneath his nose, sniffing eagerly, after the manner of a dog establishing a trail.

A long, slow smile of gratified complacency curled Mr. Marks's upper lip as he slowly unfolded his letter. It contained but a few lines and was signed " Yours distractedly, Christine Gray."

Mr. Marks returned the note to its envelope, stroked the little whiskers upon his jawbone, and meditated. The first thing to be done was to answer it, so he laid out pen and ink and a sheet of white foolscap paper. Then he paused suddenly. Christine had used blue paper, small in dimensions and adorned with her monogram. Evidently blue paper was the proper medium for

communication between the sexes, and Mr. Marks had none.

He was, however, a man of resources; he would borrow from Mrs. Colson. So he again descended the stairs. Through the half-open door he saw the lady seated before her desk with what appeared to his covetous eyes as mountains of blue paper within reach of her hand. He had but to knock or even speak her name and his quest was ended. This, however, was not his idea of the proprieties of life, só he repaired to the doorstep, rang a violent peal at the bell, and shivered in the east wind until the maid responded, then inquired for Mrs. Colson and stalked majestically into the hall, where he preferred his request with stentorian tones and profuse verbiage.

His need at once supplied, he returned to his room, sublimely unconscious that every boarder in the house knew he had borrowed blue note-paper and speculated with wondering amusement as to the date of the wedding.

Mr. Marks dipped his pen into the ink and wrote

"MISS GRAY, DEAR MADAM:"

fluently. Then he paused and, taking up a pencil, made several rough draughts on the sheet of foolscap before transcribing the following words upon the blue paper:

"It will be convenient for me to be present at your residence at eight o'clock this evening, the 10th instant.

"Yours composedly,

"JOHN N. MARKS."

"'Composedly,'" he reflected, applying his tongue to the mucilage of the envelope, "is the antonym of 'distractedly.' And I am calm—quite calm."

There were many glances directed at Mr. Marks when he appeared at dinner that evening, with every hair standing severely upright and the shining expanse of his black satin, ready-tied cravat relieved by a chaste and elegant gold-plated pin,—a dove holding in its mouth an olive-branch, from which hung a crystal dew-drop,—and he found himself the recipient of much unusual attention, which he endured with lofty condescension.

"Mrs. Colson," he remarked abruptly as he left the table, "I would be obliged if you would place a quart of milk and some ham sandwiches in my room at ten-thirty. By that time I am of the opinion it will be necessary for me to eat again."

"Did you ever!" said Mrs. Colson appealingly.

"Love," said the old gentleman, with a gruff laugh, "affects the present generation strangely. In my day it destroyed the appetite; now it appears to produce an inward vacuum which is to be filled after a visit to the fair inamorata. Ladies! ladies! you are responsible for much."

And the ladies responded with the customary refrain,—

"Oh General!"

Mr. Marks walked briskly down the street, occasionally feeling in his pocket to make sure his letter was quite safe. He had no intention of posting it, knowing it would not be delivered until next morning, but a small book on etiquette he had recently purchased reiterated that a communication from a lady should be answered at once. Therefore he had replied immediately.

"For Miss Gray," he said, delivering the blue enve-

lope into the reluctant hand of the boarding-house factotum who had responded to his ring and turning abruptly away from the open door, as though fearing he would be called upon to explain his motive.

On the opposite corner was a drug-store, and there he directed his steps to wait until Christine should have had sufficient time to prepare to receive him.

"For," he reflected generously, "no doubt she would desire to make some slight changes of apparel, some frivolous feminine adornment," and involuntarily his hand sought the dove with the dewdrop.

"I will wait fifteen minutes," he decided, his eyes on the drug-store clock.

But no thought of feminine adornment occurred to Christine, who sat dejectedly in her own room with red eyes and trembling lips. On the table beside her lay a small package addressed to the Hon. Charles Rivers, House of Representatives, also a long white envelope, soiled and creased with much handling, which she glanced at apprehensively from time to time with expressive face.

"Oh Molly," she said, "you might do it for me—you *might*."

But her sister shook her head.

"I must go back now," she said, rising. "I have been gone nearly an hour, and the day nurse will wonder what has become of me. You know I took the night duty, but he is so much better that to-morrow I shall tell the doctor only one nurse is necessary."

"Yes," said Christine, without interest. "Oh Molly, I can't do it! I *can't!*"

"It isn't a question of what you want to do, Christine," said the older girl gravely, "it's a question of

right and wrong. If you gave those papers to Mr. Rivers on New Year's Day, and I found them in Mr. Leigh's pocket two nights later, why, there is something very queer about it, that's all, for Mr. Leigh had been ill some days before he was discovered; and then, too, they are important, or he wouldn't be muttering about them in his delirium. I don't know what the proper course would be, but Mr. Redmond is a kind man,—I have seen enough of him to know that,—and he is Secretary of State and would undoubtedly know what was best."

"Well," said the younger girl rebelliously, "why didn't you give them to him yourself without dragging me into it?"

"Because," said Mary, "I was afraid. You have gone your own way lately without regard for me. I had seen the papers in your hands; they were heavy with *your* perfume. I did not know what an investigation might disclose, for there are things, Christine, which I did not even whisper to myself."

"Don't," cried Christine sharply, "don't, Molly! It's not so. I have been foolish, that is all."

"Yes, dear, I know. It's all right—it's all over. Perhaps Mr. Marks will explain where he got this envelope. Bring him with you this evening. I will ask Mr. Redmond to see you and you must tell him your story, just as you told it to me. No one must be shielded, you understand?"

"Oh Molly," cried Christine with a burst of tears, "he said—he *did* say—he would return the papers to the State Department and no one would be any the wiser. It seemed such a natural thing for him to do; but here they are—the hateful things! There must be

some mistake. Why, he is a Member of Congress, he could not stoop to such things."

Mary's mouth hardened, and she picked up the little package contemptuously.

"I will mail it as I go out," she said slowly. "Were you mad, Christine, to accept this necklace and that diamond star? Is there anything more?"

"No," said Christine with a gasp, "one was Christmas and one New Year's. The flowers I couldn't keep, except one of each to press—they faded, you know. He wanted to marry me, Mary. Don't look at me that way!"

"Did he say so?"

"He said he loved me," said the girl softly, "and, of course, that's what he meant."

Mary Gray turned abruptly to the window and stood a moment in silence.

"Bathe your eyes, dear," she said gently, "and try and control yourself. You wrote to Mr. Marks, as I asked you?"

"Yes, Molly, I didn't say what I wanted. I wish Harry was here."

"And so do I," echoed Mary, with a fervent sigh. "I must really go, Christine. Do not be later than nine o'clock,—the Secretary will have finished dinner by then,—and ask for me. It's hard, I know, but it will soon be over."

"Molly," said Christine, with something between a laugh and a sob, "you were born centuries too late. You were intended for a Spartan mother. Good-by."

The slipshod servant announced the arrival of Mr. Marks and produced his note at the same time—she had not thought a special trip upstairs necessary to deliver

the letter when it was entrusted to her care, nor did Christine cast more than a cursory glance at the epistle concocted with so much labor.

"If I must, I must," she said as she went to the closet and got her hat and coat.

* * * * * * *

"But I assure you," protested Mr. Marks, "I know no more of them than you do."

They were walking slowly through Lafayette Park, and he held in his hand the bone of contention in the shape of the long envelope.

"Well," said Christine sharply, "you brought them to me yourself, and I consider you responsible for all this trouble, with your white hyacinths and ossification papers."

"Bless my soul," exclaimed Mr. Marks, astonished.

"I *do*," she repeated irritably. "Would anybody else in the whole world give a package to a girl without knowing what was in it, and then say weeks afterwards that he had a half-consciousness of picking up something in the park one rainy night? It's just ridiculous, that's what it is. And what are you going to say to the Secretary of State? He'll want more than a half-consciousness, I fancy."

"Really," returned the unhappy youth, "I don't know what to say. Why do you insist on going? It is a most unpleasant expedition."

"We are going," said Christine grimly, "so that you may explain to the Secretary all about those papers."

"Miss Gray," said Mr. Marks firmly, "I suggest that we do nothing of the sort. Why should your sister

force us to accede to her views of what is right? Have we not independent brains of our own? I came out to-night with a definitely established purpose in mind. I had decided after much thought to make a proposition to you I have long meditated, and have no intention of being diverted therefrom for any reason. Let us sit down."

"It's cold," objected Christine, "and the benches are covered with snow. I don't want to sit down."

Mr. Marks, however, steered resolutely for a secluded bench which rested upon the shining expanse of a frozen puddle.

"I think this would be a good place to locate," he remarked gently, pushing his companion into it and seating himself beside her. Their combined weight was too much for the thin covering of ice, and the bench broke through with an unpleasant splashing of muddy water.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," wailed Christine, "what a sight! my new coat!"

"It is immaterial," returned Mr. Marks loftily. "I am about to pay you a high compliment, Miss Gray, and should be glad of your undivided attention."

"Well," said Christine resignedly, "please be quick. My feet are freezing."

Mr. Marks cleared his throat and thrust one hand negligently into the breast of his overcoat, after the manner of an orator he much admired.

"The world," he began pompously, "is full of women. In some States their preponderance over man (according to statistics) is little less than terrifying. Woman is the weaker vessel. She is made for man's convenience; her lot to walk submissive at his side,

performing whatever duties fall in her way, while he devotes his God-given brain and ability to achieving his ambitions."

"Indeed!" interrupted Christine indignantly.

But Mr. Marks, immersed in rhetoric, did not hear her.

"Sometimes," he continued fluently,—"I may say frequently,—we see unmarried women, which, of course, means that no man has looked with favor upon them. It is, perhaps, their misfortune rather than their fault. But you, Miss Gray, need fear no such catastrophe. From the first my eye has been attracted by you, as yours, no doubt, has been by me, according to the laws of affinity."

"Upon my word!" began Christine, but he silenced her with a wave of his hand.

"Certain books," he resumed, "which I have recently consulted tell me that persons of your coloring and figure live long and are healthy. Therefore I now make you an offer of my hand and heart."

"What do you mean?" demanded Christine vexedly. "You are talking nonsense, Mr. Marks. Let us go on."

But Mr. Marks was determined to finish his discourse. He felt that he had not expressed himself quite happily, and strove to remember the words of his book on etiquette, under the heading, "Proposals of Marriage."

"Honored lady," he said eloquently, "deign to be my wife. I offer you my all—myself——"

Here he paused, a victim to memory and innate honesty.

"All except my head," he added humbly. "I have bestowed that upon a scientific society, to be dissected after my death, but what remains is yours."

The electric light shone full on Mr. Marks as he made this extraordinary statement, and Christine glanced at the face bent eagerly towards her, with its shining spectacles, its tufts of pale-brown whiskers upon the apex of the jawbone, and the curling upper lip, fringed with chapped skin, the result of winter winds.

"I'm sure," she cried with a hysterical laugh, "if I had to marry you at all, I'd much rather do it without your head than with it."

Mr. Marks drew back suddenly, as though he had received a slap in the face.

"Am I to understand that you decline?" he said slowly.

Something in his voice caused the girl to look more closely at him, and her manner changed.

"I've hurt you," she said gently. "I'm sorry, but I didn't know you really cared, you—you never said a word about *loving*, you know."

"It is quite immaterial," he returned, rising stiffly, "let us go on. I will leave you at the door of the Secretary of State if you persist in holding this unnecessary interview, but I firmly decline to accompany you any farther."

Christine grasped his arm, with a sudden realization of the ordeal before her.

"Oh, you mustn't," she gasped, "you mustn't. What would I do all by myself?"

Mr. Marks hesitated visibly. Here was the weaker vessel appealing to him for support.

"If I thought my presence would sustain you," he began, unwillingly conscious of the little hand upon his arm, "but you have just convinced me you do not wish my support."

The pressure of the hand tightened, and Mr. Marks saw two troubled brown eyes gazing up at him, eyes which brightened as they looked before they were veiled by the lowering of white lids. The ghost of a dimple played about her cheek and the red lips curled upward irresistibly.

"If you really loved me, you'd go with me," she whispered. "I'm afraid, you know."

Hope sprang up within the bosom of Mr. Marks, and the head consecrated to science was bent eagerly over the weaker vessel, created for man's convenience, now walking submissively by his side with meekly downcast eyes. This, indeed, was as it should be.

"I will attend you, honored Madam," said he, quoting again from his little book and not daring to trust to original inspirations. "Pray command me. Be careful, or you'll step in the puddle."

The last sentence was not a quotation from the treatise on etiquette.

XXXIII

AFTER strong emotion of any kind comes reaction. Estelle Redmond found herself unable to lift her head from the pillow the morning following the death of Colonel St. John. She was overcome by a lassitude impossible to ignore, and could only lie still with closed eyes and throbbing temples.

Again and again she reviewed the events of the preceding night. Was it possible it was all over, and she herself safe at home, with no sword of Damocles suspended over her head, no sickening horror of what the next minute might disclose?

The Secretary entered softly and bent over her with a few murmured words of anxious sympathy. She grasped his hand in both of hers, laying her face against it, and drawing much comfort from his presence.

"Stay with me," she said. "Oh John, never, never let me out of your sight again."

He laughed and gently pressed his lips to her hot forehead.

"How tired you would get of the old watch-dog, dearest. Lie still and rest. All this trouble and excitement has been too much for you, as I feared. You must countermand your engagements for the day, and when I get home from the Department we will spend a long, quiet evening together, and have our dinner served in your sitting-room, so you need not even trouble to

dress. I must go now. You are sure it is only a headache?"

The day had worn on slowly, and gradually the throbbing in her temples had subsided and the lassitude been replaced by a sense of security and great peace. She had stood on the brink of an abyss; her feet had even touched the crumbling earth about the edges, then suddenly the hand relentlessly pushing her forward had thrust her back.

"Sometimes," murmured Estelle, "sometimes God in heaven *does* hear prayers from earth."

In the afternoon she went into her sitting-room and lay upon the couch, very white and still, with shining eyes and loosely clasped hands. Upon her desk a vase of roses filled the room with their perfume, lifting their great heads proudly, but Mrs. Redmond's eyes clouded when she observed them and she touched the bell beside her.

"Take them away," she said impatiently when Josephine appeared, "I hate red roses."

And the maid had carried them off, greatly wondering.

To her presently came Isabel Byrd, who hung affectionately over her with solicitous inquiries and many sympathetic touches of her brow and hair—Isabel, who laughingly begged to be allowed to stay for dinner.

"Because, Estelle, I am cross to-day and don't want to go anywhere to-night, so if you'll keep me just as I am——"

And Mrs. Redmond, with a little sigh for the tête-à-tête dinner and long, quiet evening, had put her arm about the girl and urged her to remain.

"I'll telephone to father to come for me," remarked Isabel, removing her hat with alacrity. "He can take

Aunt Mary to the Lawtons and then slip off here; he'll like that, I know."

"The Lawtons," said Mrs. Redmond, raising herself on her elbow, "*the* ball of the season—why, Isabel!"

The color rose in Isabel's cheeks and she turned away towards the fire.

"I don't want to go," she said shortly. "Mr. Rivers will be there. I don't want to meet him."

"Mr. Rivers," said Estelle thoughtfully, "Mr. Rivers—oh——"

Quite suddenly she remembered the ring Lyndhurst had found on the floor of the Octagon House and given her for safe-keeping, and which she had forgotten in the impending crisis of her own affairs. She said nothing to the girl, however, merely telling her to bring her low chair close to the couch and be comfortable.

"Estelle," said Isabel as she obeyed, "you look as though you had been ill for weeks, with all your vitality wrung out of you. It troubles me to see you."

"I've not been myself," returned the older woman quietly, "for some time, dear, many—many weeks it seems to me, but I'm going to get well. Just wait and see. And now, Isabel, what shall we talk about?"

The girl laid her face on the pillow beside her friend and slipped her hand shyly into Mrs. Redmond's.

"Tell me about Mr. Leigh, Estelle," she whispered, "all about finding him and everything, I want to know."

* * * * * * *

The Secretary enjoyed the dainty little dinner, served at the round table in Mrs. Redmond's sitting-room, with his wife on one hand and Isabel Byrd on the other. He

noted with pleasure the light which had returned to Estelle's eyes and a spontaneity in her laugh which had long been lacking to his sensitive ears, and had responded delightedly to her evident desire to be amused, even resigning himself to eating much more than he wanted that she might be satisfied, for the Secretary's appetite had failed perceptibly of late.

To-night, however, Estelle and Isabel had suggested that no servant be in attendance, and had themselves selected what he should eat, merely stipulating as a return for this attention that he consume it all. Isabel had demanded a chafing-dish, boasting of her success in the preparation of a certain *entrée*, and the Secretary had become absorbed in the concoction of a salad he had known in France, the result of which was beyond reproach.

In short, the dinner was a great success, and if Mrs. Redmond ate little herself, she managed to conceal the fact by lively contributions to the conversation, and frequent suggestions and criticisms during the preparation of the salad and *entrée*. If her eyes sometimes filled suddenly and threatened to overflow, they were happy tears and hurt no one, and if she now and then laid her hand on her husband's with an involuntary tightening of the fingers, only the Secretary knew it, and he invariably returned the pressure, just by way of showing her he understood.

"It has been the nicest dinner I ever had," exclaimed Isabel at its conclusion. "How I wish father had been with us."

So the Secretary retired to the library to smoke his cigar, feeling a strange lightening of the load which seemed to have settled upon him of late, and dismissed

affairs of state as much as possible from his thoughts, with the optimistic reflection that things might work out right after all, while upstairs Mrs. Redmond and Isabel drew their chairs before the fire and resumed the subject which had engrossed them before dinner. Mrs. Redmond's hand lay on the girl's bright hair, and she touched it tenderly now and then as she talked. Once she paused, and Isabel raised her head impetuously.

"Go on, Estelle," she said breathlessly, "go on. In his delirium he repeated one name constantly, the nurse said. What was it?"

Mrs. Redmond told her, and the gold-crowned head was hidden on her friend's lap.

Senator Byrd, coming in search of his daughter, and the Hon. Joshua Grimes, coming in search of any information he could glean regarding David Leigh, met on the doorstep and were taken into the library, where the Secretary greeted them warmly and provided them with chairs and cigars.

"Only I stipulate," he added, laughing, "that we don't touch on public matters. Leigh is out of danger, but still very weak. Oh, yes, Grimes, he is here; had you not heard? Then I may take the entire credit of your visit to myself? That is good. Isabel is upstairs, Byrd; she dined with us *en famille*, and we had an uncommonly good time. Mrs. Redmond is a little under the weather, but I think she will see you both and later we will join them. What is it, James?"

James approached and said something in a low tone, and the Secretary excused himself and withdrew. He was absent some time, and the two men drew their chairs together and entered into a discussion upon the impending crisis. Mr. Grimes related the story of his luncheon

with the Member from Virginia and his deduction therefrom, and Senator Byrd frowned impatiently.

"Now, Byrd," said the Member from South Dakota impressively, "I've been your friend this many a year, and you used to place some confidence in my judgment."

"And do still," interrupted Senator Byrd, smiling.

"Well, I'm going to try your temper, I reckon, but I sha'n't be happy till I free my mind. I think Rivers is playing a snide game, for all his nicely parted hair and well-creased trousers, and I wish his engagement with Isabel was off."

The Senator hesitated a moment.

"I hardly know what to think," he said slowly. "Rivers has surprised me lately. It is not like him to show his hand so plainly unless he is certain of the game. He means to be President, you know, and would like the Portfolio of State as a stepping-stone, but I hardly agree in your opinion; you are not exactly an unbiassed judge, you know. As to his engagement with Isabel, well, it *is* off, and, so far as I know, it won't be renewed. She will not allow his name mentioned."

"A fine girl," cried the corpulent Member with much satisfaction, "an uncommonly fine girl of great good judgment."

The return of the Secretary prevented further discussion of the subject. He held in his hand an envelope and his eyes shone with repressed excitement.

"Gentlemen," he said abruptly, "you are, I know, both aware that the Roostchook papers are missing."

"Yes," said Senator Byrd.

"To-night," continued Mr. Redmond,—"just now, in fact,—I received a message that the nurse in charge of Leigh wished to speak with me. I found her in the

drawing-room with a remarkably pretty and very much agitated girl, whom she introduced as her sister, and a rather peculiar looking young fellow. This girl, with much embarrassment, related a most extraordinary story and produced this envelope. It contains the Roostchook papers."

His hearers gazed at him in mute amazement, and he continued rapidly:

"Moreover, these papers were brought into this house in Leigh's pocket. Miss Gray, the nurse, saw them and recognized them as a package she had seen in the possession of her sister. She took them to her to make sure, and insisted that the girl bring them to me and explain how they came into her possession. She did not, of course, realize their importance, but she knew they were official papers which should be returned to the Department. It is the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of. I cannot doubt the sincerity of the girl, but I do not know what to think of the man. I should like you to hear her story, as it bears a grave implication and I should be glad of your advice."

"By all means," said Senator Byrd gravely, "let us hear it."

"She is very young," said the Secretary, "and very frightened, poor child. I think, Byrd, she can hardly be as old as Isabel."

He went into the drawing-room and returned at once, preceding Christine and Mr. Marks, the former evidently suppressing an inclination to run away; the latter wearing an air of superior protest against the entire proceedings.

"Miss Gray," said the Secretary gently, drawing forward a chair for her, "these are friends of mine,—

Senator Byrd and Mr. Grimes,—and I should like them to know the story you just told me. Mr. Marks, gentlemen."

Mr. Marks looked as though he would have repudiated his name had that been possible, and, sitting down upon the extreme edge of a chair, fixed his eyes upon the ceiling.

"Mr. Marks," said the Secretary, suppressing a smile, "went to call upon Miss Gray one stormy evening in December, and very naturally desired to take her some flowers. I wish you could remember the date, Miss Gray."

Christine shook her head helplessly; dates were not her strong point. Mr. Marks, however, ceased his contemplation of the ceiling long enough to produce a memorandum-book and turned over its pages with accustomed fingers.

"Under date of December 2d," he said briefly, "I find three entries, as follows: Changed laundress; purchased white hyacinths, fifty cents; called upon Miss Gray. I should judge, therefore, that the date was December 2d."

"Now, Miss Gray," said Mr. Redmond, "please tell what followed."

And Christine unwillingly related how Mr. Marks had forgotten to deliver the flowers and they had been sent to her room later, accompanied by a package she did not open.

"You see," she said helplessly, "I thought they were things he wanted me to read, and I did not feel interested in them. Mr. Marks is highly scientific and reads all sorts of articles with long words I don't understand, for I'm very ignorant. So I put the bundle in my

bureau drawer, meaning to open it sometime, and forgot it. I'm—I'm awfully sorry."

The Senator recognized that tears were not far from the girl's voice and felt an inclination to say it was of no consequence. Suppose it were Isabel? Mr. Grimes, however, was anxious to get at the root of the matter.

"Young man," he said abruptly, "kindly explain how those papers came into your possession."

"I do not know," said Mr. Marks blandly. "The evening was inclement, and in passing through Lafayette Park my hat was forcibly removed from my head by the strength of the wind and I was obliged to exercise speed and ingenuity in its pursuit. The railing surrounding the statue of Jackson arrested its flight, and I have a sub-consciousness in the lower strata of my brain that when I rose to my feet I grasped something beside my hat. I know nothing more concerning the episode."

"Well, see here," said the Member from South Dakota, "I reckon you'll have to cultivate those lower strata a bit. We want to know more about the matter."

"Miss Gray," interposed the Secretary, "forgot the package until New Year's Day, when she discovered it in her bureau-drawer and opened it. She was naturally dismayed at its contents and puzzled as to what she should do with them. It did not occur to her at the time to bring them to me."

"Well," said Mr. Grimes impatiently, "well, young lady, what did you do with them?"

"I gave them to a friend," she said slowly, "who said he would return them to the State Department. I thought I was doing what was right."

"Of course," said Senator Byrd soothingly, "of course. And the friend was Mr. Leigh?"

"No," said the Secretary, "the friend was Mr. Rivers."

Mr. Grimes indulged in a long whistle, and Christine turned a lively and painful scarlet even to the tips of her ears.

"Mr. Rivers," said the Secretary gently, "knew Miss Gray's father. He was one of his constituents."

"But," said Senator Byrd after a silence of some minutes, "how did the nurse recognize the papers in Mr. Leigh's pocket as the ones in her sister's possession if they had never been opened?"

"By a peculiar perfume her sister uses," returned the Secretary.

"Yes," said Christine, feeling it was incumbent upon her to speak, "the minute Molly smelled the envelope she knew it was the one Mr. Marks gave me."

"I am sure," interposed Mr. Marks in a tone of offended dignity, "my person is permeated by no odor which exudes therefrom and penetrates inanimate objects."

"No," cried Christine hysterically, "but mine is!"

Then, to the surprise and consternation of the four men, she hid her face in her hands and began to cry, and Mr. Redmond hastily left the room.

"Molly," she sobbed, "I want Molly."

"She wants Molly," said Mr. Grimes, as though Molly were a stick of candy. "Yes, of course, Byrd, she wants Molly."

Senator Byrd laid his hand on her shoulder and spoke quietly. He understood the ways of girls.

"Don't cry, my dear," he said gently, "you have

told us everything we want to know and we are very much obliged to you. Is Molly your sister? I think Mr. Redmond has gone to fetch her. Of course, you are tired and nervous. It has been quite an ordeal, has it not? My daughter is about your age, and I hardly think she could have gone through it as bravely as you."

But Christine continued to sob until the return of the Secretary, accompanied by her sister, who took her away, while the three men turned their attention to the unhappy Marks, who passed a most miserable hour, but succeeded in convincing them he knew absolutely nothing more than he had related.

When Mr. Grimes let himself into the hall of his house on Massachusetts Avenue he executed a momentary *pas seul* before hanging up his hat.

"Rivers, my friend," he remarked politely, "I agree with you that all evidence in the Roostchook case should be placed in the hands of the President."

Late that evening the Secretary sat in Mrs. Redmond's dressing-room and told her the story of the recovered papers. He even drew them from his pocket and spread them out before her one by one, gazing at them with much of the devouring expression a mother bestows on a lost child. And she listened with flushed cheeks and glistening eyes, following the narrative closely with little gasps of astonishment.

"I'm glad," she said, "oh, so glad, John."

"I should be better satisfied," he said, "were it not for the complication about Rivers. Of course, the papers changed hands again, but it's a strange case."

Mrs. Redmond hesitated.

"I think, dear," she replied, "that Mr. Rivers visited the Octagon House himself."

Then she told him the history of Isabel's ring, and added that she had that evening returned it to the girl, who had announced her intention of giving it to her father to do with as he thought best.

The Secretary sat a long time in silence, his wife's hand in his.

"Estelle," he said at last, "you remember the old man you asked me to appoint as watchman—Saunders, I think his name was?"

The dark lashes quivered slightly.

"Yes, dear," she said, "what of him?"

"He died last night," said the Secretary; "suicide, they think, and, Estelle——"

"Well, dear?"

"He was discovered by the police in the Octagon House when they searched it this morning. It seems he was janitor there. I believe he might have thrown some light on the subject of Mr. Leigh if we had only known. I gave directions that he be decently buried at my expense, as he was an employé of the Department, but he had considerable money about him. Curious, wasn't it?"

XXXIV

DAVID LEIGH had turned the corner. He had, in fact, made rapid strides along the road to recovery, so much so that he was now permitted to cross the hall into Mrs. Redmond's sitting-room every afternoon, where he held informal receptions, and received attention enough, he said, to turn his head entirely. To which remark Mr. Grimes, who happened to be present, returned concisely that when a head had so lately been cracked it was well to keep it steadily in one position, lest the crack be revealed to the world in general.

David settled himself in the armchair consecrated to his use and glanced about expectantly.

"She's not here," volunteered Mr. Grimes kindly; "you're an hour earlier than you were yesterday. Getting feverish again?"

Leigh blushed with the consciousness of a girl, and the Member from South Dakota laughed in great good-humor.

"Fact is," he said, crossing his legs comfortably, "I happened in when I knew everybody was out because I want to have a talk, if you think you're able. Don't mind, do you?"

"No," said David, "certainly not. I want to talk, Mr. Grimes, or, rather, to ask questions, and you know they have not let me speak of anything they thought

exciting. I'm very grateful for the care, of course, but I think I'm getting tired of being nursed, and there are things I must know—questions which must be answered by somebody."

Mr. Grimes crossed his short legs as comfortably as his rotundity of figure would permit.

"Fire away, sonny," he remarked genially. "When you've finished I've got a few inquiries to make in return."

"But," said Leigh, hesitating, "it's Department matters I want to talk about with the Secretary, or perhaps Senator Byrd. You're very kind, Mr. Grimes, but——"

Mr. Grimes chuckled with great enjoyment.

"I'm your man," he said importantly. "I reckon that just now I am as well up in the affairs of the nation, so far as the State Department is concerned, as the Secretary himself, and perhaps a little better. Things got so muddled I found I'd have to put a finger in the pie after all. So trust your Uncle Joshua, Davy, and sail in."

When Mr. Grimes referred to himself as Uncle Joshua it was an indication he was well pleased with the world, and he applied the title in much the same spirit with which he usually referred to his country as Uncle Sam.

"They make a great team," he remarked modestly on one occasion, "your Uncle Joshua and your Uncle Samuel."

Leigh rested his head against the back of his chair a little languidly. He found himself not quite so ready to accept Mr. Grimes's invitation to sail in as he had anticipated.

"The Secretary told me," he said slowly, "not to worry about the Roostchook matter—that it was all right. Is this possible?"

"Yes," returned Mr. Grimes cheerfully, "quite possible. Papers turned up intact, villain spotted by your humble servant. Great scene for the stage, David. Virtue triumphant. Vice vanquished. Red fire. Tableau. Curtain."

"I don't understand," said Leigh, puzzled. "Where were the papers found?"

The Member from South Dakota leaned forward that he might watch his companion's face.

"In your coat-pocket," he said, anticipating an astonished exclamation.

But the young man merely nodded impatiently.

"Oh, if that's all," he said, "a bundle of blank papers. I thought you had really found them, and I wondered——"

He checked himself abruptly.

"Blank grandmother!" ejaculated Mr. Grimes; "they were the real thing, but it's a long story. Now, listen carefully, for I don't like to repeat myself, being rather short-winded."

And David listened with breathless attention as his companion rapidly sketched the events of the period during which he lay unconscious as a result of contact with Colonel St. John's brick."

"Marks," he interrupted once, "and Miss Christine Gray? Why, I know them both. Impossible!"

"No! Do you, though?" said Mr. Grimes with interest. "Well, then, perhaps you'd like my opinion of your friend Marks. He is either the deepest double-dyed rascal in the country, or he should have a guardian

appointed to look after him when he walks abroad. I've not been able to make up my mind which."

"He is not a villain," said David, laughing, "I would stake my own reputation on that fact, but he *is*—well, unusual."

"Unusual! There he sat, David, and there we sat—the Secretary of State, a United States Senator, and a Member of Congress, a dignified and awe-inspiring assembly to confront the average youth. Did we faze him? Not we! He said he picked up the papers—so he believed—in Lafayette Park; he left them (if his memory did not fail him) at the door of Miss Gray's boarding-house, why he did not know. That was all. We simply hammered at him, but not an inch further did we get."

"Probably," interposed David, "he told you all he knew."

"Humph!" ejaculated Mr. Grimes. "Well, that's all he *did* tell us. And the Secret Service men set to watch him and trace his very thoughts report him of unblemished character and can account for every minute of his valuable time for months. But to resume."

And he once more took up the thread of his narrative.

"Rivers," interrupted David again, "the Member from Virginia? The man who——"

"Well," said Mr. Grimes, "why hesitate?"

"I don't know why I should hesitate, I'm sure. I was merely going to ask if it is the man Miss Byrd is to marry?"

"No," ejaculated Mr. Grimes explosively, "not by a long shot. She's going to marry somebody else if I know anything about it."

David turned his face into the shadow.

"Whom?" he inquired, studiously indifferent.

Mr. Grimes did not reply. Instead, he screwed up one eye in a long, deliberate wink, and resumed his story.

"And so," he concluded seriously, "I went to the President myself and laid the whole matter before him. He was hard to convince, but I had my proof, only I didn't want to drag that little Gray girl into any more unpleasantness than necessary. He's a very straight fellow at the bottom,—the President is,—and don't tolerate anything slippery if he knows it, so he sent for Rivers."

"Well?"

"Well, that's all. Rivers is going abroad. His term expires this fall, and I understand his district will have another Representative next session, as the gentleman from Virginia does not mean to run again."

"Mr. Grimes," said David thoughtfully.

"That's me," returned the Member promptly.

"You've told me about the first paper which disappeared, but how about the last, the synopsis, you know?"

"The Secretary found it in his desk."

"What?" exclaimed Leigh in astonishment.

Mr. Grimes nodded.

"In his desk, here at the house," he repeated. "He thinks it got caught in the drawer and was overlooked. It's queer, very queer."

Leigh was sitting upright, a bewildered expression on his face.

"How did it get there?" he inquired.

"Ah," returned his companion, "I don't know. What's more, I didn't ask. 'There are more things in heaven and earth,' you know, David, and I'd no wish to

upset another hornets' nest. The main point is that they were intact. The Secretary thinks he put them there and forgot it and deplores his absentmindedness. I think——"

"Yes," said Leigh breathlessly, "what do you think?"

"Well," returned the stout gentleman, "since I've been quoting Shakespeare, I'll do it again. It's my opinion 'there is something rotten in the State of Denmark' as well as the Hon. Charles Rivers of Virginia, but I intend not to make or suggest any further investigations, and I strongly advise you to follow my example. Now, young man, a few questions on my part. What the devil were you doing in the Octagon House and who hit you? Out with it, for I don't take much stock in your not knowing."

Leigh leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes wearily; the conversation had been somewhat exhausting.

"Mr. Grimes," he said reluctantly, "I'm afraid I've been an awful fool."

"I shouldn't wonder, my boy, young men often are. But it's something if you recognize the fact. Let's hear about it."

"I believed I knew who took those papers. The night of the ball here I discovered, as I thought, a clue. It wasn't much, just a bit of State Department paper with a few words on it, but I saw who dropped it. I unfortunately lost it myself and came back here after everyone was gone and made a thorough search. I went over every inch of the floor, but it wasn't there. I had papers on the brain and wanted to find them the worst way, and suddenly remembered the Secretary's desk in

the library. I thought it possible he might have put them there (as you say he did the synopsis), so I even looked through it."

He paused an instant, then continued:

"Well, they weren't there, so I went home without meeting anyone, although I had a curious sensation of being watched and followed. The next day the Secretary went to the White House and brought back the synopsis. He was much troubled, and talked the matter over with Senator Byrd and Mr. Rivers, who returned with him. He put the paper in his desk, but went to receive the diplomats without removing the key. Miss Byrd came in to meet her father, and I took her to the State Department library. We stayed a long time, and when I got back the Secretary was just going out to lunch with Mrs. Redmond. I found something on the floor by the desk which made me anxious. Another clue, I thought.

"Well, of course, the next thing was the discovery of the loss of the synopsis. I worried a good deal over it, and determined to go through the Secretary's private desk myself, thinking it might have caught somewhere, for it wasn't a bulky document, like the other.

"The night after Christmas I felt out of sorts with the world and didn't want to go anywhere or do anything, so I started for the Department to get up some back work. While I was there I happened to think of looking up the paper. I had a key which Mr. Redmond had once given me, and I made a thorough search, but the paper was not to be found. It was late when I left——"

Leigh paused and endeavored to collect his thoughts.

"Just why I turned up New York Avenue I don't

know. I suppose I was absorbed in thought, for I had been making notes on some important matters to bring to the attention of the Secretary in the morning and had put some loose bits of paper in my pocket, intending to elaborate them when I got home, for I wasn't sleepy.

"Well, I suddenly discovered I was going the wrong way and turned down an alley as a short cut home. It ran back of the Octagon House and was dark and lonely enough, with the high brick wall and vacant old house, and I had some idea of going back, although I had often used it before as a short cut. However, I kept on until I got opposite a break in the wall, when something—curiosity, I suppose—made me stop and look through."

"Well?" inquired Mr. Grimes with interest.

"Well," said Leigh simply, "that's all. The next thing I knew I was here, awfully light-headed and queer-feeling, with Miss Mary Gray nursing me and everybody wonderfully kind, Mrs. Redmond sitting with me, Miss Byrd sending me flowers, the Secretary acting as though I were his own son, and you, Mr. Grimes, coming to see me every day and even keeping my room and belongings at the boarding-house undisturbed. I don't know how to thank you."

But Mr. Grimes was looking in his card-case and did not reply.

"Was the scrap of paper you found and lost again at the ball anything like this?" he demanded, producing a dingy bit with a few words upon it.

"That *is* it!" said David eagerly. "Where did you get it?"

"Picked it up myself," returned Mr. Grimes, tossing it into the fire, "and I think that's the best place for it.

Of course, the scrap Rivers found in the Octagon House was part of your notes and dropped from your pocket."

The round, red face of the Member from South Dakota was very serious as he watched the bit of tri-colored cord blaze and blacken in the hearth.

"David," he said slowly, "whom did you suspect?"

Leigh crimsoned and turned his face into the shadow.

"You won't say? Well, it's all right. Only understand clearly that the incident is closed irrevocably, and remember that circumstantial evidence is often misleading. You came perilously near being charged with a serious crime, and I realize you were in a mighty tight box, but you're well out of it, after all. The old chap found dead in the Octagon House I take to be responsible for your cracked skull, but he isn't going to make any explanations, and so, David, I propose the subject of the Roostchook papers be tabooed in future. Talking will do no good, so we'll drop the subject."

"I've been a fool, that's all," said Leigh quietly, "and—I'm glad of it."

A rustle of skirts became apparent in the hall, and Mr. Grimes rose with alacrity.

"I guess you don't need me any more," he remarked cheerfully, "for there are Mrs. Redmond and Miss Byrd, and if that is not enough for one fellow, I don't know what is."

But it was only Isabel who entered as the Congressman went out—her cheeks glowing with the cold air and her eyes shining with a soft brightness Leigh thought pleasant to look upon.

She told him various little items of news she thought would interest him, and finally lapsed into silence as the daylight waned and shadows filled the room.

Leigh looked at the bright hair, with the firelight playing over it, and at the curve of the cheek, against which the dark lashes rested.

"Isabel," he whispered.

Her color faded, then suddenly returned, dying her face with the tint of a wild-rose. David forgot he was merely an impecunious private secretary and she the daughter of Senator Byrd as he leaned forward and caught her hands. The memory of their relative positions, however, leaped obnoxiously to the fore and checked the words trembling upon his lips, so he released the little hands and sank back in his chair, suddenly weak and exhausted.

Isabel looked anxiously at the pale face and closed eyes, then her lips curved with the ghost of a smile and the dimple in her cheek showed a decided inclination to appear. She left her low divan and seated herself upon the arm of his large chair, her lips close to his ear.

"David," she whispered softly, "I'm waiting—*go on.*"

XXXV

THE Secretary stood in his library holding in his hand a sheet of paper, as he had previously held the draught of his resignation.

To-day, however, there was an erectness in his attitude very different from the air of general depression which had marked the former occasion. Two chairs sociably drawn together before the fire indicated that he had recently entertained a visitor, and an indescribable something about them suggested that the guest had been welcome.

Now, however, judging from his expectant glances at the clock and out of the window, he expected someone else.

"How long she stays!" he exclaimed impatiently. "Ah, at last!"

For the front door had opened and shut and he heard Mrs. Redmond's voice in the hall.

"Suppose you look in on Mr. Leigh in my sitting-room, Isabel," she was saying; "I will join you shortly."

The Secretary drew aside the heavy portière and held out his hand.

"I've been watching for you," he said; "you promised to be home early, you know."

"Yes," she assented, "and now I want to tell you

about my afternoon. There is something I want to do very, very much."

"And I too have something to tell you," he said. "Come to the fire; you must be cold."

Mrs. Redmond paused in the act of removing her heavy furs and looked curiously at him.

"Something has happened," she exclaimed suddenly, "something nice. You have had a visitor. Oh John, tell me!"

"Yes, dear, a visitor—the President. Don't look so startled, he used to come sometimes, you know."

"But not lately," she replied, "not since——"

"Listen," he continued. "This morning I sent in my resignation. I owed it to myself to do so even though the missing papers have all been found."

"I don't care a bit now," she interrupted, "for there could be no stigma attached to your name. Well?"

"Well, Estelle, as I said, I sent it in this morning, and this afternoon the President brought it here and asked me to withdraw it as a personal favor to himself."

"And you," she said, "what did you say to him?"

"I said," returned the Secretary, "that I only wished to serve my country honestly, and that sometimes such service was best rendered by withdrawal from public office when age or ill-health had in any way impaired the faculties."

"And he?"

"He said all sorts of kind things, dear, and was very complimentary. He apologized for his attitude during this trouble and said he had been much worried, and facts falsely represented to him. He was genuinely anxious that I should remain, and so I agreed to do so.

There will be no official record of my resignation. He left it here with me, and I shall destroy the copy in the files of the State Department. I thought——"

The Secretary paused and smiled.

"Well, John?"

"I thought, Estelle, that perhaps you would enjoy burning it. You seemed to take the matter very much to heart the other day."

"Oh, I should," she exclaimed quickly, "give it to me at once!"

The Secretary seated himself upon the couch and drew his wife down beside him. The sheet of paper burned brightly, then charred and crumbled, and Mrs. Redmond, watching it, remembered, with a tightening of the throat, the cellar of the Octagon House and the blaze of the burning maps. Fire was merciful at times as well as terrible, she thought.

"And now," said Mr. Redmond cheerfully, "I've told you my news, what is yours?"

"It isn't news exactly. I went to see Miss Gray this afternoon. Her pretty little sister is going to be married."

"Indeed," exclaimed the Secretary, "I am heartily glad to hear it!"

"And I thought," continued Mrs. Redmond, her eyes upon the plain gold band on her left hand, "I thought, John, I should like to help her. They are two girls alone in the world without money, and it's such a dreary boarding-house. You don't mind?"

"Did you think I would object?"

"Oh, I *knew* you wouldn't, but I wanted to talk to you about it, of course. I should like her to have a nice little wedding and some pretty clothes, such as every

girl longs for and should have when she marries. She brought us back those papers, you know, and I feel we owe her a tremendous debt of gratitude—at least, I do."

"Is Marks the happy man?" inquired Mr. Redmond, laughing.

"His name is Harry, and his regiment is in Alaska—that is all I know about him, John. But it's immaterial. He gets a leave next month and can come on, and I mean he shall find Christine daintily fitted out, with *pretty* things, dear, as well as useful. I'm extravagant, you know, and I do love clothes—so does she, poor child. So when Harry comes we will have a nice little wedding here in this house, and you'll give the bride away. Do you agree?"

The Secretary held his wife closer and kissed her forehead.

"It's like you to think of it, Estelle," he said fondly; "of course I agree. And speaking of brides," he added, "I wonder how the young people upstairs are coming on?"

The young people were getting on extremely well upstairs, although their conversation was of a disjointed and fragmentary character incapable of being properly recorded, and the disorder of Isabel's red-gold hair was more apparent than usual.

"It glitters," said David, carefully transferring a strand from his coat to his card-case, "like spun gold."

"I should think," said Isabel with an attempt at a frown, "you might have asked for a lock of it by this time, but perhaps you don't want it."

The last words were muffled, owing to a temporary eclipse of two heads by the back of one chair.

"By the way," she said suddenly, drawing away from

him, " by the way, David, there's something I want to know. Why did you take those papers?"

" What papers?"

" The blank bundle labelled ' Roostchook' from our library table. I saw you put them in your pocket."

" Some valuable papers were missing from the Department on that subject," he said slowly, " and I thought perhaps I had found them, so put them in my pocket on the impulse of the moment, meaning to return them to the Secretary or your father. When I found they were blanks I said no more about it, but I never understood——"

He paused abruptly.

" I do," returned Isabel sagely. " Oh, I'm wiser than you think. Mr. Rivers——"

" Hateful name," interposed Leigh quickly.

" We will call him the Unmentionable, if you like it any better. Well, anyhow, he knew you were coming and put that package there to see if you would take it. He was trying to prove you guilty of something, David, I don't just understand what, but you fell into the trap like a blind bat and put it in your pocket. I thought I should have died when I saw you do it."

Leigh stared at her incredulously.

"And does your father think I stole that package of papers believing them genuine, and kept quiet about it?" he said.

" No," returned Isabel, with a shake of the head, " he doesn't think anything of the kind, for I fixed up another package and father and the Unmentionable found it. But *I* thought you took it, David, and I was very miserable—so miserable that I got engaged."

" But how you must have despised me."

"No, I didn't," she interrupted; "I tried to, but I couldn't, so I despised myself for not being able to despise you. He—the Unmentionable—said all sorts of nasty things about you and what he meant should happen to you, so I stole out that evening to tell you about it, and to ask you not to do it again, whatever it was you *did* do—and it was nothing, after all, was it?"

"No, Isabel," returned Leigh anxiously, "I've done nothing I am ashamed of. But you said you went to see me. When was it, and where did you go?"

"It was one Thursday," she said, "and I went to your lodging, but just as I got nearly there you came out the door and went down the street. I tried to overtake you, but you walked too fast for me. You went to the old part of the city and I kept on following, even down a horrid, muddy alley, and it was raining and very dark. In the alley I lost you, but I thought I saw you go through a hole in the wall, so I kept on. I really think then I was afraid to go back. The place turned out to be the Octagon House, and I was so relieved when I knew where I was that I thought I'd just run through it and out on Eighteenth Street, on the other side, you know, so I need not go back by way of the alley."

"But," interrupted Leigh, "I never went to the Octagon House until the night my friend hit me with the brick and carried me in."

"Oh, I know. That was the awful part. It wasn't you at all, David. It was—put your ear very close—Count Valdmir. He went into a room with a light in it and an old man met him. I was very frightened and hid in a little place off the dining-room, with a secret door you know. They talked a long time, and the old man seemed afraid of him, but I couldn't distinguish

what they said. I tried to get out of the window on Eighteenth Street, but it wouldn't budge, and I caught my hair on the rough wood and tore my dress. My heart beat so I thought they must hear it. By and by Count Valdmir left and I took the opportunity to rush through the hall out into the garden again; even the alley was better than that awful house. I got wet coming home and was late for dinner, and Mr. Lyndhurst kept asking me inconvenient questions. It was dreadful. But where *did* you go, David?"

"I sometimes use that alley as a short cut from street to street," he replied, "and have a recollection of doing so one Thursday evening when I went into that part of the city on an errand to one of the clerks in the State Department. I had an engagement later and must have taken the shortest way of getting there, and in the darkness you lost me. But, oh, Isabel, when I think that you did it for me, and what might have happened——"

The remainder of the sentence was unintelligible, but seemed satisfactory.

"I wonder," he said after a long silence, "what your aunt and father will think."

"Oh," responded Miss Byrd with an air of easy assurance, "Aunt Mary doesn't matter and father thinks as I do on such subjects."

XXXVI

THE last door slammed, and the last carriage rolled away. Sleepy servants thankfully began to set the house to rights, for the Secretary and Mrs. Redmond had entertained the President and members of the Cabinet at dinner and the guests had at last departed. Mrs. Redmond looked at her husband and smiled.

"Well, it's over," she remarked. "I never enjoyed a Cabinet dinner so much before. And the season is over too. I am not sorry."

"Tired?" questioned the Secretary. "Come with me into the library. I must smoke my cigar, and I'd like your society to improve the flavor."

"A speech worthy Monsieur du Pré himself," she returned as they entered the library. "What a famous fire."

"How the diplomatic world changes," remarked the Secretary, striking a match. "Valdmir gone, and Lyndhurst going. I fancy the latter was rather hard hit by Isabel; he tells me he intends to give up diplomacy and settle down into an English squire. I hope he may find some nice girl at home waiting for him."

"I hope so too, John. Mr. Lyndhurst is every inch a gentleman as well as a nobleman. He could not soil his hands with anything unworthy of him."

"Why should he?" inquired the Secretary, surprised.

She did not reply, but her face grew very thoughtful

as she gazed into the fire, and the Secretary felt the hand in his grow suddenly cold.

"Now Valdmir," he continued, gently chafing the cold hand, "was very different. In spite of his polish and brilliancy, I never liked him. Wonderfully clever fellow, though, Estelle. But there was a hardness about him quite repellent to me and I believe him to be unscrupulous and without mercy. Heaven help the woman, for instance, who was in his power."

For a moment she did not reply. The handsome library, lined with richly bound volumes, some of them almost priceless, had vanished, and she was again in the Octagon House with Count Valdmir, they two alone in the great dark cellar with only the dead man above to keep watch.

"I am cold," she had said.

"Then, Madame," he had responded, "we will light the fire."

She remembered the lifting of the candle and the flickering of the flame in the draught from the chimney. Also the mass of ashes upon the hearth after the maps were burned."

"You are not just to Count Valdmir, dear," she said gently. "I know of one woman to whom he was both merciful and generous."

"Well," he insisted, laughing, "I'm glad to hear it, but I'm willing to wager she was the exception and not the rule."

"Turn off the lights," she said, "I want just the fire. That's light enough for confidences, isn't it, John?"

"How dull your opals are to-night," remarked Mr. Redmond as he complied, "they scarcely glow at all."

He lifted the jewel at her throat and looked curiously at it as she drew a footstool to his chair and leaned her head against his knee.

"John," she said after a long silence, "of what are you thinking?"

"Of you, dear, and of the completeness of our life together. It is so wonderfully satisfying."

A scarlet flame played about the opal for an instant, then faded, and the stone hung cold and colorless.

"I read somewhere," she said slowly, "that between a man and wife should be perfect confidence; that there should be no reservations one from another; that without such confidence real happiness was impossible and love could not endure. Do you believe this, John?"

The Secretary watched the smoke of his cigar fade into space.

"It is the generally accepted theory, Estelle," he said quietly, "but, as you know, I do not believe in it. Between a man and woman—in fact, between any two human beings—real happiness is impossible without some reservation. Too close an intimacy brings with it carelessness and contempt. In my opinion, a man has no more right to raise the curtain from his wife's silence than he has to enter her dressing-room uninvited."

"You really think so?"

"I know it, Estelle. Endless misery is brought about and useless suffering inflicted upon the innocent by mistaken ideas of duty—hysterical so-called confessions, which open wounds about to heal, leaving ugly, ever-present scars to mark the place. It's my hobby, you know. Why did you get me started on it?"

"Sometimes," she said, "quite often, John, I think

it would be better if I told you more about my early life. You take me too much on trust."

"Love brings with it faith, dearest. The book of the past is closed forever. I do not wish you to open it for me."

"But," she persisted, "once I did you a great injury. I would die for you, gladly, but I nearly wrecked your life and mine."

He laid his hand gently upon her lips.

"Hush, dear," he said, "you don't know what you're saying. Whatever it was,—whatever you imagine you have done,—don't tell me. I do not want to know. Only one thing matters. Do you love me still, Estelle—it isn't *that?* Let me look into your eyes."

The fire flamed brilliantly as he bent over her. The dark lashes, heavy with tears, were slowly raised, and the Secretary gazed through the clear blue eyes into the heart of the woman he had married.

* * * * * * *

The log charred and fell apart.

"Estelle," he exclaimed, "I believe you are asleep."

"No," she returned gently, "only very, very happy, John; that is why I was quiet."

"We have been sitting here an unconscionable time," he said, rising. "I don't know what I was thinking about to let you do it. I suppose I must have been happy too, eh, Mrs. Redmond?"

He turned on the lights as he spoke and paused in astonishment.

"Estelle," he ejaculated, "look at your opals! What can have happened to them?"

The jewels were cold and lifeless, without color or fire,

and crossed by a network of innumerable tiny cracks. She slowly removed the necklace and girdle and took the crescent from her hair. The diamonds flashed as brilliantly as ever, but the opals were worthless bits of broken stone.

As she gazed incredulously at them she remembered the history of the Khedive's opals as related by Count Valdmir, and her lips parted in a tremulous smile.

"Extraordinary!" said the Secretary, examining the pendant close to the light.

"I think," said Mrs. Redmond softly, "I am too happy to wear opals, John."

"I'll take them to a jeweller," he responded, "and see what can be done, but I think you will never wear them again. Such wonderful stones too! Well, Estelle, let us have a glass of wine. We need it after this last shock. Come, I insist, for you must be very tired."

She followed him to the dining-room and held the sparkling glass thoughtfully.

"The last of the season," she said; "even the opals are ended. It's over—all over. Now, John,"—she raised her glass,—"here's to the best man in the whole world—the Secretary of State."

The Secretary smiled and touched her glass with his.

"First," he said fondly, "to the wife of the Secretary of State."

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